

ORBIT

SCIENCE FICTION

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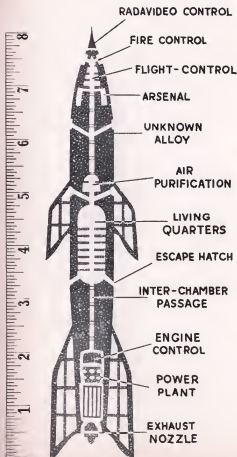
NINE EXCITING STORIES

PLUS

Full-Length Novelette by
RICHARD ENGLISH

August Derleth, Mack Reynolds, Charles Beaumont, Paul Brandts

In this ISSUE! ?



INVASION from the MICROCOSM

A master story-teller of science fiction and a tale with many surprises . . . including the new approach to space-ship construction illustrated on this page. It is a space-ship that comes from . . . where? SEE PAGE 4.

ORBIT

Volume 1, No. 1

THE BEST IN Science Fiction

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BERNARD GORDON, Art Director

ESTELLE TUCKER, Production

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INVASION

from the

MICROCOSM



THE POOR PROFESSOR WAS

A VOICE CRYING IN THE

WILDERNESS . . . UNHEEDED,

UNBELIEVED . . . UNTIL A

WOMAN'S TOUCH PROVED

HOW RIGHT HE WAS!

by August Derleth

I RAN INTO Tex Harrigan that day at the Cliff-Dwellers' Club. He was sitting moodily at one of the windows looking out over the sunlit lake.

"What's the matter?" I said. "You look like the last rose of summer. Reporter's blues?"

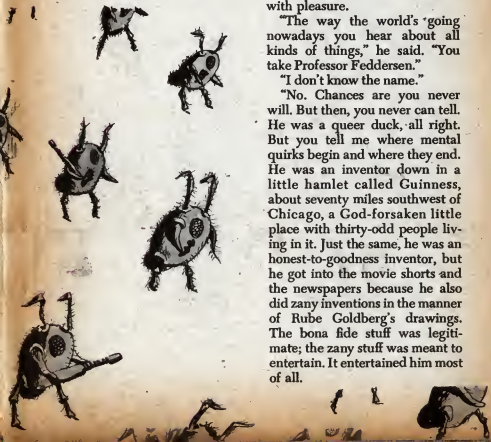
"I've been thinking," he said.

I said I was glad to hear it, but he did not look upon my levity with pleasure.

"The way the world's 'going nowadays you hear about all kinds of things," he said. "You take Professor Feddersen."

"I don't know the name."

"No. Chances are you never will. But then, you never can tell. He was a queer duck, all right. But you tell me where mental quirks begin and where they end. He was an inventor down in a little hamlet called Guinness, about seventy miles southwest of Chicago, a God-forsaken little place with thirty-odd people living in it. Just the same, he was an honest-to-goodness inventor, but he got into the movie shorts and the newspapers because he also did zany inventions in the manner of Rube Goldberg's drawings. The bona fide stuff was legitimate; the zany stuff was meant to entertain. It entertained him most of all.



"We used to do routine stories on him. He was a tall, willowy old fellow, with a dome-like skull, out of which sprouted a few thin wisps of silky hair. He had fierce, intent eyes, black, as I recall them, and a thin, pursed mouth, high cheekbones, hollow cheeks, bushy eyebrows, half white. He could be engaging enough; he had a good sense of humor. The last few times, however, I noticed him getting more and more serious, and it wasn't like him.

"Well, I got sent down on a routine assignment — he'd done some whacky thing designed to operate a slough of household gadgets while a machine rocked the baby to sleep—and he opened up on me.

"Tell me, Harrigan," he said, 'do you ever think very much of this world of ours?'

"I said I didn't have time to think about it a hell of a lot.

"No, nobody has. Still and all," he went on, dead serious, 'I wonder if we oughtn't to think about it a little more. Here we are; we don't know where we came from or where we're going, and lately the thing's been bothering me. Now we're in the middle of atomic experiments, and I've been thinking. What if we exist in relation to some greater universe just as atoms exist to us?'

"It took me a while to digest that. I turned it over and over in

my mind, but of course it didn't make sense. He could see I was having difficulty.

"Just imagine how big we must look to an ant. We know how small an ant looks to us. Well, suppose we're no bigger than ants to creatures on other worlds.'

"Sure," I said. 'That's easy. That's the way it was in the days of the brontosaurus.'

"An atomic world," he said. 'Suppose an atom holds a universe. After all, size is relative. It might be possible for a duplication of our own universe to be held within an atom. On the other hand, we might seem atomic in size to even greater universes.'

"I began to smell a story. Listen," I said, 'you're on to something. Give out.'

He hedged. He wasn't ready to admit anything but that he'd been giving the problem some thought. In the end he took me over to a microscope and told me to look into it. I did.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"Nothing but a green dot, a pin-point or smaller.'

"Let me magnify that.'

"He did. The point came out a little more clearly.

"If you look close you'll see that it has a body, what passes for legs, arms, a head. Could be tentacles.'

"Bacteria?" I guessed.

"A form of life," he said.

"Where'd it come from?"

"You tell me."

"I kidded him. I accused him of playing with atoms. He had access to the cyclotron at the University of Chicago, and it might have been. He didn't track along. He was too preoccupied to joke.

"Well, about two weeks later, Cary called me into his office and asked me whether Feddersen wasn't my boy.

"Sure," I said. "What's he invented now?"

"Cary threw me a press dispatch. 'Scientist Warns of Sub-Microscopic Invasion.' The old boy was giving out stories about an invasion by creatures from an atomic world. 'Ha, he's off his nut,' I said.

"Go to see him."

"Orders were orders. I ran down to Guinness.

"The old boy looked haggard. Can you beat a deal like that? Invasion by an army you couldn't see? He was dead serious.

"What's it now?" I asked. "Have they begun to move in on us?"

"He just led me over to his work-bench and pointed. 'What do you make of that, Harrigan?"

"That was a pretty peculiar outfit, admittedly. About the size of a matchbox, I thought at first it was a working model of a torpedo. But, no, it looked more like a pocket in miniature.

"Try to lift it, said Feddersen.

"I tried. It was heavier than lead. I could hardly budge it. 'What is it?' I asked.

"He told me. He had found it almost buried in the ground of a woodlot adjoining his property. He had got it into the house only with the help of two neighbors. He had immediately attempted to discover of what metal it was made; he had not yet been able to do so. Since it was so obviously the work of — well, for lack of something better to say — human hands, he had tried to find an opening in it. He had not succeeded in this, either. Yet it seemed clear that it was a model of some kind of rocket, probably operating on a jet principle like those with which our government has been experimenting. It was possible that it was one of their models, manufactured to scale. Feddersen might have got it anywhere—I was wary of him, knowing his zaniness. It was not beyond him to have put together an elaborate hoax, and for all that I knew about it, he could have told me the thing was made of Martian granite.

"Except, of course, that he didn't.

"And how does that tie up with your warning of a sub-microscopic invasion?" I wanted to know.

"I don't know that it does. But

I've been wondering where the invaders came from — and how they came. Perhaps this is the answer.'

"He never cracked a smile, and he seemed genuinely worried.

"That thing," he went on, 'is capable of carrying millions of them.'

"And what do they do for artillery and machine guns or whatever they use?"

"He brushed this aside. 'Oh, they wouldn't need weapons as ancient as that,' he said.

"Or maybe they're vegetarians and intend to devour all the foliage.'

"Or carnivores,' he agreed soberly. 'I have thought of that. If they have a basal metabolism similar to that of our own shrew, they could make away with a good deal of food in a day.'

"Well, he went on to talk about his observations. Seems he had been putting the things under the microscope . . ."

"Hold on, Tex," I cut in. "If he couldn't see them with the naked eye, how could he put them under the microscope?"

"Why, they were everywhere. He could scoop up a handful of dust and find them. What he saw disturbed him.

"I'm convinced they're making preparations for some major action against mankind,' he said.

"I thought he was kidding. 'Oh,

come,' I said. 'If they're as small as all that, what can they do?'

"You forget that they may have weapons far beyond our comprehension. Death rays, paralysis rays, poisons unknown to our science — why, the possibilities are unlimited. And since they're invisible to the naked eye, what can impede their movements? I think it an extremely fortunate fact that they chose my home for their base of operations — a coincidence, of course, but how fortunate for the human race!"

"What could he do? I asked him.

"For one thing, we'll have to contain them."

"Ha! That's a term I've read a lot of times with reference to Europe and Asia. Ever since Locrano.'

"The principle's the same,' he said, never cracking a smile. 'As far as I know now, their base of operations doesn't extend beyond the house — or perhaps beyond this room. So in effect they're contained right here within these walls.'

"I conceded that he had made a beginning. He could call out the militia at any time. I could imagine the boys of the National Guard shooting up a couple of million microscopic invaders.

"There wasn't much of a story to be had in Feddersen. I got him

a two-column spread on an inside page, and I figured that was that.

"But no, inside a week he was back. He was trying to alert the Secretary of Defense to the dangers of planetary invasion. It made quite a story. I got it first on the teletype. Can you treat a thing like that seriously? Well, neither could the wire services. 'Amateur Scientist Says We Are Under Attack,' they put it. 'Cause for Alarm, Holds Alarmist Inventor.' Feddersen telephoned me; he was indignant.

"By that time, of course, Cary had told me to pick up another story on him, preferably with a comic slant.

"I ran out to his place and found him stewing around, in a pretty frantic state.

"'Look, Harrigan,' he said, 'I know positively these fiendish aliens are perfecting some hellish assault on our civilization. They mean to take over the Earth, no less.'

"'That's a pretty large territory for microscopic armies.'

"'Don't make fun of me. This is my field, and I know what I'm talking about.'

"'You scientists are all alike. It wasn't more than three decades ago most of you were keeping up the fiction that the atom wasn't fissionable.'

"'No one's infallible,' he agreed. 'Just the same, we're under attack,

and I can't seem to get anyone to take me seriously.'

"Now, I'd never really studied Feddersen's microbes. I undertook to do so. I looked at those bugs or specks or whatever you want to call them until I began to feel like one. As a matter of fact, I got so I thought of them as microscopic imitations of human beings. They certainly seemed to have a pair of arms and a pair of legs. They had excrescences I'd call heads. Feddersen confirmed all this. But how many bacteria come out looking vaguely like men? God knows!

"Feddersen had something under a slide and I had to take what he told me it was. An alien invader from an atom-size universe. It might have been a form of bacterial life, for all I knew. Some of them seemed to give off a black effusion — in miniature, like a squid, you know. Some of them appeared to be carrying something — but that may have been an optical illusion; if they were microscopic, what they carried was almost sub-microscopic. I couldn't say they carried weapons. Feddersen could and did.

"'I put it to you,' I said to him, 'that this is nine-tenths imagination on your part, Feddersen.'

"He denied it, angrily. 'Harrigan, I'm the scientist—not you. I'll take your word for journalism; you'll take mine for science.'

"I tried a new tack. Then, if they're intelligent beings, no matter how small, they must know we're on to them."

"Of course. And it doesn't trouble them. They aren't afraid of us, don't you see? That only proves my contention."

"I couldn't see that and said so. Trouble with people like Feddersen is they're apt to become dogmatic at the drop of a hat. Feddersen figured he couldn't be wrong; maybe you get that way after the kind of publicity he was accustomed to getting for every one of his zany or sane inventions."

The waiter came up and asked whether we were drinking. Harrigan ordered a whiskey and sour; I did the same. Harrigan lapsed into brooding silence.

"What became of Feddersen?" I prompted him.

"I was coming to that. I didn't get much of a story out of him that day. I couldn't do a comic turn, Cary's orders or not. There wasn't any reason to doubt Feddersen's sincerity—only his judgment."

"He gave me quite a rigmarole that day. He had things pretty well figured out. He was sure that the invaders were in some sort of communication with their home star or planet or whatever it was—maybe even an atom-sized microscopic world inside our own planet—and that, once conditions

were right, a full-scale invasion would begin.

"But if we can't see these things, how can we fight them?" I wanted to know.

"We'll devise some means," said Feddersen. "Science always comes through."

"Seems to me the first thing to be done is find something to make them visible. If one can be seen under a microscope, then a million ought to be plain to the naked eye."

"A million in one spot, yes," he agreed. "But they won't be in one spot. So far they're just in this room, and they've gone back to their ship."

"Oh, it is their ship?"

"It must be. They've taken possession of it, and they're using it for their immediate base."

"How did he know that? Why," he said, by watching their movements, the directions they took. Always to and from the queer thing he had dug out of the ground across the road. He had not actually seen any of them going in or out of the craft—if that's what it was. But he had been able to see concentrations of them without the aid of his microscope—thin green lines, thinner than a hair—which he took to be marching columns. Marching columns! That's how far gone he was. Could I put down anything about it for newspaper use without

making him look like the grandfather of all the whacks? No, I couldn't."

Our drinks came, and once more Harrigan sat looking out of the Club windows to the lake, not watching the boats, but just staring. He shook himself presently, and went on.

"Well, the end came sooner than I expected. It was only about a week later when the telephone rang one day and there was Feddersen at the other end of the wire, so excited he could hardly talk.

"Harrigan — another's come in!"

"Another what?"

"Another of those queer ships — space ships. It came flying through the window, broke the glass, and came down beside the first one. I've been trying to get in touch with you for quite a while . . .

"How long ago?"

"About an hour."

"I'll be right out."

"I went out and sure enough, there was another of those curious rocket-like craft. I say 'craft' because I don't know what else to call them. Models, maybe, Miniatures. I've said that before. As I say, that's what they might have been. I'm not a scientist, only a reporter, and my job's just to report what I saw. And that day I saw two of those things,

side by side, and the busted window, with the glass inside, showing it had been broken from the outside. Circumstantial evidence, of course. But of what?

"Feddersen was sure he knew. the full-scale invasion was about to begin. But why in Guinness? Why not Chicago or New York or London? Simply because Guinness was where they had first landed. And with what weapons? Feddersen thought he knew that, too. They had some sort of disintegrators. He even had what he called proof for me. He rolled up one pants leg and showed me where he had been attacked.

"I felt those pricks and got out of the way just in time," he explained.

"There were tiny holes in his flesh, all right. They could have been made by a red-hot pin. They went in perhaps an eighth of an inch. Can you imagine how much disintegrating they'd have to do to take over our world? Ha!

"The only thing I couldn't quiet explain to my own satisfaction was that second craft or model or whatever it was. How had it come there? Or had Feddersen gone to the lengths of catapulting it through the glass into his house? And, if so, how had it come to settle down so easily beside the other one? No, there was a mystery there. Of course, he could have arranged to catch the

thing in a hammock or some such arrangement, and then lowered it to where I saw it. But how far-fetched can you get?

"Are they wounds or not?" he demanded.

"Sure. Pin-pricks," I said.

"What kind of evidence do you want, Harrigan?" he asked.

"Only something my readers can believe."

"Well, then, take a picture of those two things."

"No sooner said than done," I told him. "Just the same, it won't be enough for our readers. We have a highly intelligent body of readers . . ."

"His answer to that was unprintable."

"I figured that something was bound to happen sooner or later to bring the thing to a head. And something did. Not quite what I figured, though. Professor Feddersen simply disappeared. Something made a shambles of his study. His niece telephoned the police, and I went down as soon as the wires began to carry the story. The police were looking for me, anyway."

"Seems Feddersen had let out a shout and, when his niece had come running to see what it was all about, he had said, 'They're attacking. Get hold of Tex Harrigan at the *Register* and tell him to come right out.' She had tried, but I was on an assignment some-

where else. She had gone into his study to report that, and he had vanished. Moreover, all the furniture on one side of the room had sort of fallen together, as if something had crushed it. She went straight to the telephone and called the police.

"When I got there, the room was still the way she had found it. So she said at the time. Actually, though, there was one little difference. Was it trivial or important? I wouldn't begin to say. She mentioned that later. At the moment I was busy looking at the damage. The chairs looked partially burned. So did the desk and the rug. The two rockets by the window were untouched. Everything looked just as if something had begun to eat it away — like termites — because there weren't any *remains* except the untouched portions of the furniture."

"What made me uneasy, however, were the things on the floor. Feddersen's eyeglasses, for one thing. Fragments of what I'm pretty sure were human teeth. Some wisps of silky half-white hair. Now, add that all up with a little imagination and you can come to some pretty startling conclusions. But leave out the zealous imagination, and you have a highly explosive minus quantity. Feddersen could have arranged the scene with ease."

"He was never seen again."

"Two little things, though, have always nagged at me.

"First, those models of rocket ships. Of course, we gave the story a big play, and the ships or models were eventually picked up and examined by other scientists. They were found to be almost solid, of some kind of metal or metal alloy with which our own men weren't familiar, but which they felt sure had been put together by Feddersen. Inside they had tiny canals or passages, almost like flaws in the structure, leading to pockets or rooms, and some kind of incredibly minute instruments of which the scientific brethren could make neither head nor tail.

"Well, by the time we got the report from them, the head we gave the story was a natural—'Feddersen's Zaniest Invention!'

"The other thing is fascinating material for speculation.

"I said, you remember, that the room was just as Feddersen's niece found it, with one trivial change. The microscope was still in place and, when I had a moment that day Feddersen disappeared, I scooped up a handful of dust and put it under glass. Those little green things were still in it, but every one was dead as

a doornail. I tried again and again to find something alive. I couldn't do it.

"Finally I cornered the niece. 'Look,' I said, 'just what happened when you came into the room?'

" 'Why, I saw Uncle was gone and I ran out to call the police.'

" 'And then?' I prompted.

" 'I came back in to make sure he wasn't here. He wasn't.'

" 'So that's all?'

" 'That's all,' she said. 'Except . . .'

" 'Except what?'

" 'Well, forgive me, Mr. Harrigan, it's hardly worth mentioning. It's a very small thing. When I came back the second time and looked, I had the impression the furniture was still wasting away, but before I could collect my thoughts I felt something pricking me on the legs. I never know what kind of bugs or things my uncle works with, and I never care. But I had no intention of being bit up. So I went out and got some powdered DDT and sprinkled it all over. Did it matter, do you think?'

" 'Ha! Did it matter? Did it, indeed! Think of it—Possibly an entire interplanetary invasion wiped out by one dose of DDT!' . . .

The illustration is a black and white line drawing. The lower half features a close-up of a woman's face, looking upwards with an expression of wonder or surprise. She has dark, wavy hair and wears a light-colored headscarf or shawl. The upper half of the illustration, which is partially enclosed in an oval frame, shows a small, stylized figure in a jungle environment. The figure appears to be wearing a hat and a light-colored outfit, and is surrounded by dense foliage and large, broad-leafed plants.

LUENA of the GARDENS

by Paul Brandts

**A LOST EARTHGIRL FINDS
HERSELF AND HER WORLD
... AND A MAN, TOO.**

IN THE first moment that Luena closed the heavy iron gate behind her and entered the Garden, she sensed the presence of something alien. The rows of lettuce, carrots and tomatoes, generally so noisy and unruly at this hour of the morning, were entirely too quiet. None of the flowers were doing their giddy, foolish little dances. Even the savage Virginia creeper, usually strain-

LUENA OF THE GARDENS

ing so insanely at the heavy wires that bound it to the garden wall, was quiescent.

Her first thought was that one of the giant cabbages had broken from its cage and was doing harm to whatever was nearby. She pushed aside the black feedbag suspended from her waist, touched her hand to her Carnac for reassurance, then mounted the orange causeway that led into the heart of the Garden . . . But an inspection of the cages revealed nothing amiss. Each of the fat monsters was safe inside, and asleep as usual, its strange body concealed by the protective mantle of leaves.

But when she came to the open space beyond the cages she noticed motion for the first time, near the far wall of the Garden in a lonesome clump of maize which was weaving about in indignation and distress. At the same moment that she caught her breath in alarm, the cornstalks were thrust violently aside and a man burst forth.

He was very different from any of the men she had seen in the city or in the temple grounds; his body tall, his face white and hairy, and his clothes odd-looking and tight-fitting. He came forward, his eyes fastened upon her, and called in a hoarse but penetrating voice:

"Now, don't you move, and

don't make any sound, and nobody's going to hurt you."

He was plainly an intruder and it was her manifest duty to destroy him, but her instinct as usual was to help rather than to harm. "Go back! Go back, whoever you are! It is very dangerous for a stranger here!"

"Don't you think I know something about that?" He was brushing yellow grains of corn from his arms and shoulders in a casual manner. "Sean Tulley doesn't go into a strange place without finding out something about it first."

"I insist that you leave at once!" To emphasize the urgency of her words she turned into a branch of the orange causeway and came toward him, gesturing imperatively. "The plants in this Garden are ones Tes Kempak imported from a far-off place called Earth, and crossbred them with our native varieties! They all have strange properties, and many are very dangerous!"

"So that's the reason behind it." He nodded wisely. "Well, lady, a smart man is one who makes good use of his warnings." In demonstration of his superior sagacity, he made a careful detour around the ugly, menacing branches of a bramble bush, and approached by way of the cleared space near the creeper-clad wall.

His actions served only to bring home the true extent of his ig-

norance. The bramble bush, as any child knew, was as harmless as a swamp-puppy. While the Virginia creeper . . . ! No Taalite in his right mind would venture within ten feet of a tendril of the creeper, while he — he was walking beneath it!

To her vast relief he turned away almost at once from the hard, clear ground near the wall, vaulted with lithe sureness over a row of squash and stood in the ditch at the foot of the causeway, staring up at her.

"Now, surely you wouldn't go chasing me away so soon? After I lay there for an hour, with that crazy corn pecking at me and swatting me, and just to get a look at you—. Surely you wouldn't be chasing me away so soon?"

There was an odd, half-humorous twist to his mouth that disarmed part of her fear, and curiosity vanquished the rest. "At me? You came here to look at me?"

"And why shouldn't I? After I heard men talking about you in every port along the Oberara—and after I said to myself, 'Sean Tulley is the man who is going to find out for himself?'"

"The Oberara?" His words together with his appearance put a wild theory into her head. "Surely you are not one of the Earth-pirates of the Oberara?"

"I am that." He sounded quite satisfied with himself. "And now

you know me to be one of those monsters, are you going to give the alarm and claim a reward?"

"No, I won't, not if you promise to leave at once! You—. What do they say about me in the ports along the Oberara?"

"I'll tell you." He was studying her as closely as if to memorize every detail of her features. "They're saying that in the experimental Gardens of a man named Kempak, a girl works who does not look like a Venusian at all but like an Earthgirl. They're saying that maybe she was captured from Earth parents when she was very young, and brought up by the Venusians."

"Oh, that sort of story." She was disappointed. "They say those things because the girls in the city sometimes call me disgusting names, like Earthgirl, or white-faced worm. They do it because they hate me."

"There could be another reason for the stories." His voice was almost a whisper. "It could be that—. By all the moons of Jupiter, it's true!" he interrupted himself explosively. "It's true, every word of it! Your complexion is not yellow at all! It's dyed! It's dyed. You're a lost child of Earth!"

If he had expected her to react in some fashion, or even to pay heed, he was doomed to disappointment, as her mind was suddenly engrossed by a new worry.

The Virginia creeper on the wall. While they had been talking, a stray coil of the vine had managed somehow to squirm free from the heavy bands of wire, and was poised in the air, the antennae of the beautiful red flowers quivering with curiosity, the blue-black berries pulsating angrily. At this point the branch of the causeway was perilously near to the wall—and she was well acquainted with the rubbery quality of the body of the creeper. Was it only her fancy, or was the stray tendril rearing to strike?

"I haven't made you understand, girl." He was watching her in a puzzled fashion. "You don't belong with the Venusians. You're not of the breed. You're a flower blooming in alien soil. You—."

At this instant the arm of the creeper was a gray blur as it slithered through the air, and in a simultaneous motion Luena pulled up her Carnac and fired.

The arm of the vine evaporated within the core of a brilliant white light, and the Earthman bellowed with astonishment as he flung himself aside. There was a sudden motionlessness that pervaded the entire Garden. Tulley was quiet for so long that she feared the vine had actually reached him, or he had been injured by the explosion.

Then he turned over slowly and warily.

His expression was almost ferocious, but he made no movement of any sort until he had carefully appraised the situation. He looked at the gun in the girl's hand, and then at the wounded creeper, which had gone into a silent but terrible fury down the entire length of the garden wall, all of its coils squirming and straining insanely against the heavy metal bindings. He glanced also at the trail of the berry-juice on the ground, a smoking, stinking trail that bit deeply into the soil itself.

His face grew calm, and he pulled himself to his feet.

"I owe you my thanks, girl. You've done me a great favor."

"I've done a terrible thing!" she cried despairingly. "The Virginia creeper is Tes Kempak's especial pet! He values it above everything else in the Garden! Now I don't know what he'll do!"

His face darkened. "I wouldn't care to see a girl hurt because of something I've done," he said grimly. "I will lie among the trees and wait for this Tes Kempak. When he comes I will kill him."

"No, no, you must leave at once! It is only a minor offense to harm the vine! But it would be treason if I were discovered with an alien in the Garden!" As he still stood stubbornly, she went on beseechingly: "Your words are strange and disturbing — but you

will only do me harm if you stay!"

"I think you are right," he agreed thoughtfully. "It is my great fault that I am too courageous. However, before I go we must make an arrangement."

"What do you mean?"

"Lost flower of Earth, I have many things to speak to you about. I must awaken in you something you may not even know is there. Is there no place near here where we can meet, and where no one would see us?"

"In back of the temple is a grove of trees which the priests call sacred, and where the common people of Taal never enter. It is very lonely there. But it would be folly for us to meet there. We—."

"I will expect you there at nightfall." Even as he spoke he turned, and before she had time to catch her breath was off with quick sure steps among the variegated rows of flowers and vegetables. When he came to the rear of the Garden he clambered into an apple tree, ran out on one the limbs and, after a brief tussle with some of the more unruly of the branches, disappeared over the garden wall.

For some time after that Luena stood stock still, her mind a fever of strange new ideas and sensations. Telling her she was indeed an Earthgirl! The Earth-pirate had said such an unkind thing, of

course, because her appearance was so unprepossessing and homely. But somehow the mere look of him had seemed to open up new worlds before her, and lay siege to her imagination with vivid, almost spectral pictures of faces and vistas she had never seen in the real world—or perhaps had seen many long ages before. One face in particular swam before her, that of a middle-aged, kindly woman who looked toward her with a calm, self-denying love such as she had never known among any in the city of Taal. And her body suddenly yearned toward that face, with a longing so intense and painful it left her amazed and trembling all over . . .

A movement of the injured creeper recalled her to herself, and with an effort she banished the disturbing thoughts from her mind. Tes Kempak had taught her what to do in an emergency. Even her morning task of feeding the vegetables must be foregone. She must summon help at once.

But when she came breathlessly into the foreyard of the House of Kempak a few minutes later, in search of the head gardener, she received an unpleasant surprise. She was confronted by Tes Kempak himself. His narrow face was darker than usual, his little black eyes very bright, and it was obvious that he was in a rage.

"Never since I emerged from

the egg have I been faced with such effrontery!" he roared at her. "After I brought you up in my own house, with the careful severity I would accord one of my own children!"

She was amazed that he had found out so soon, and very fearful. "It—it was because you have placed too great a responsibility on the most worthless of your servants, Master," she stammered. "One of the coils of the Virginia creeper succeeded in freeing itself, and I was overcome with panic. I am such a coward. I—"

"Not until Venus sees a month of sunny days will I forgive this! I will pull his yellow beard for him! I—." He broke off, and as if with an effort fastened his attention on her words. "What is this nonsense about the creeper?"

"You are right to be angry, Master. I should merely have paralyzed the coil of the creeper, not destroy it. But I was, so frightened—."

"Pooh! Do you think I am talking of so trivial a matter? Suppose you have burned one of my plants — the medicines of Canna will mend it in no time. I am talking about the bulletin which Ankatta has posted in the foyer of the temple—and which you have certainly heard about."

"Master, I have not been in the temple. And the kitchen girls refuse to gossip with me—."

"You would do well to acquaint yourself more fully with the affairs of the temple, and the palace, as well. This, as it happens, concerns you. Ankatta, the old fool, has placed your name among those of the girls he wishes to serve before the altar of the Flame." When she stood dumbly, not understanding, her silence served to whet his fury to a keener edge: "After I brought you up in my own house, fed you, clothed you, protected you from the sons of the Haakon families! And at the whim of an old idiot you are to be taken from me! I will not tolerate it!"

"I am afraid I do not understand—."

"You are not asked to understand!" His face was almost purple. "You are asked to do only one thing! Go! Go to the high priest, Ankatta! Tell him that, entirely of your own will and without influence from me, you have decided to decline his request! If you disobey me you will spend a month regretting it! Go!"

She found Ankatta in the room adjoining the altar of the Flame, reclining on a window seat with a closed book in his hands, in an attitude of meditation. He composed his features into a look of benevolence as she approached, and even rose, which was a great honor.

"Ah, Luena! I see my request has been brought to you! Your promptness is commendable! Sit here on the seat beside me! . . . Very well, if you wish you may stand! Do you think an—um—older person has no understanding of the fears and hesitations of a young woman?"

"My lord, I am not worthy of the honor you have planned—."

"Now, now, Luena, I have watched you for a very long time. Do you know I have taken a more personal interest in you than in any of the giddy daughters of the noble families?"

"I decline to serve before the altar of the Flame." Not having the least idea how to say it, she had brought it out in a rush and with unforgivable bluntness.

But the old man was not angry, merely grave and interested. "You are being impulsive and not wise. You have lived so long in the hard, stern household of Kempak, you cannot even imagine what the life of a temple girl is like. You will dress in splendid, many-colored robes, Luena. You will lie on soft couches. You will—."

"I cannot be a temple girl."

His face was suddenly bleak. "Have you heard of what happens to those who defy the will of the Flame?"

She had. In fact, she had once by chance caught a glimpse of one of the victims of the Beast of

the Flame, and the memory seared her with fear and rendered her speechless.

His expression became mild as the wise old eyes studied her. "There is something in back of this. You yourself would not have the courage to beard me like this . . . I have it! The voice is yours but the words are those of Tes Kempak! Is it not so?"

"My master forced me, by a threat, to tell you of this."

"Of course! Tes Kempak has risen so fast in the world, he is emboldened to subject me to a test of strength! Of course!"

A silence fell, during which Luena did not have the courage to raise her head. When it finally grew unbearable, she looked up and saw with surprise that Ankatta had again stretched himself out on the window seat, in an attitude of meditation.

"What do you wish me to do, my lord?"

"Do?" He roused himself with an effort. "Why, there is nothing to be done, my dear. Ankatta has requested a girl to serve at the altar. Tes Kempak has seen fit to decline the request. And there the matter rests." He made a gesture of dismissal.

When Luena was troubled of mind or frightened, or when the company of the other servants in the House of Kempak had be-

come unbearable to her, there was one place to which she was accustomed to go. The sacred grove was shunned by the people of Taal because of unholy night-mysteries the priests were reputed to perpetrate in its depths, and today she found it as silent, solemn and deserted as usual.

In the very heart of the grove was the tallest and grandest tree of them all, its great trunk entirely concealed by a veil of white which hung from its branches like an old man's beard. Luena crossed over to it, passed swiftly through the surrounding mantle of white—and collided rather violently with the large chest of Sean Tulley.

Instantly his big hands connected themselves behind her. "Many girls have come to a rendezvous with me in the past," he smiled, "but none so eager."

"Let me go! You have hurt me! Let me go!"

He made a little comic face.

"The reward of virtue. Like an impatient lover, I came early. And behold—"

"I was very lucky to find you—because it gives me the opportunity to tell you to leave Taal at once, and never return."

"Leave Taal?" he echoed with great disappointment. "We men of the sea have so few opportunities to get our hands on a pretty girl—and you wish me to leave?"

"It is not merely because there is danger for you here. You have come, you say, because of your belief that I am an Earthgirl. It is not true. I have thought about it carefully, and it is not true."

"You are so sure?" He was studying her very intently.

"I am sure. It is true that I have strange memories of my childhood, when I lived among people far away from Taal. But they were not Earth-people."

"How do you know?"

"Because I have heard tales of the Earth-people on the islands of the Oberara—the pirates. They are a violent and warlike breed, and the women with them are healthy, strong and very brave. I am not like that at all. I am very weak, and I am a pitiful coward."

"But that isn't so at all!" he remonstrated. "Could anyone have been calmer or braver than you were, when you saved me from that monstrosity?"

"It is true that my face may have appeared calm. But my face is a mask, like the yellow paint I put on to make me look like the women of Taal. Inside I was shriveled up with fear . . . I have lived too long in the House of Kempak, Sean Tulley. I have seen too many things, and suffered too many things. I—I—." Her voice faltered, and she could not speak.

"Perhaps I have come just in time, little lost flower," he said

tenderly. He again placed his arm around her. "Now listen to me, flower of Earth. There is a road before you. It is an easy road. It is the road to a new life. Inside the great red flowers that rim the bay, I have a boat concealed. It is a boat swifter than those of the stupid Venusians. It—."

"What an invaluable piece of information," said a new voice, cold and clear as ice. "Taal will be very grateful."

They wheeled about simultaneously. Tes Kempak was just stepping through the mantle of white, behind him one of the white-uniformed members of the palace guard. Both men held Carnacs on the ready.

Tulley made a sound deep in his throat, and thrust her aside. He reached toward his coat, and for the first time it occurred to her that he might be armed. But his action was far too slow. His whole body was bathed suddenly in the cold blue-white flame of the Carnac, a violent tremor seized him—and Luena turned away.

For a fleeting moment she had dared to hope, because his voice had been so confident, the arms that had held her so sure and strong. But now without looking any further she knew what was happening. The fire of the Carnac! While it wreaked no apparent harm to the body's casing, inside his organs were being dis-

solved in raging, insatiable acids.

Tes Kempak did not deign to glance at his fallen enemy. "I knew you had permitted an alien to enter the Garden. One of my flowers told me. Some of them possess powers even you do not know about." He continued in a musing tone: "It is amazing how the spark of rebellion flickers within the breast of even the meanest and humblest serf."

He took her hand and led her away from the tree, and she obeyed as always in the past, her head bowed, every line of her body eloquent with submission.

"Of course, the whole incident should prove of advantage to me," he said. "A boat captured from one of the Earth-pirates. An invaluable prize. It—." He broke off as there was a sound behind as of scuffling feet, then a half-choked scream. He pushed her violently aside as he turned.

When by his action she was forced to raise her head, she beheld a sight that amazed her. Tulley had been resurrected to sudden and savage life. He had grappled with the guardsman, and even now was holding the other's smaller body over one of the great roots of the tree. The struggle had thrust aside much of the beard of white that surrounded the tree, and every detail of the scene was revealed as the body of the guardsman jerked convulsively,

then slid lifelessly to the ground.

During all this the astounded Tes Kempak had been busy with his gun, but the pirate walked into the very heart of the blue flame. "You've played with your toys long enough," he grinned. "Now it's my turn." The cylinder he was holding was so small his big hand almost concealed it, and there was no sound or any flash of light; but Tes Kempak was thrown to the ground as violently as if struck by lightning.

"These Venusians think we Earthmen are barbarians without knowledge of science," said Tuley contemptuously. "One of the first things our scientists discovered was a defense against the rays of the limpak."

He turned to the trembling girl and surveyed her with an almost humorous expression. "Your decision has been made for you. We are partners in crime. We must flee together."

"Don't you realize what you have done?" she cried despairingly.

"You don't mean you're sorry for what happened?"

"No, no, that isn't it! But don't you see that Kempak was wearing his uniform of an officer in the palace guard?" As his expression remained blank, she continued: "Every officer in the guard has a protective device in his coat! When he is hurt in any fashion,

an alarm is automatically flashed to the other members of the guard!"

"But how would they be able to find us here?"

"Their audio devices will bring them to us in minutes! More than that, every gate in the city will be closed until they discover the murderer of Kempak!"

"And when they examine the body, they may guess that an alien killed him," he said, after long thought. "You are the only one who can help me, lost flower. Have you friends who can hide me until the alarm blows over?"

She was amazed to find him relying on her in an emergency, even more amazed to discover her brain responding. "No, I have no friends in Taal. But I know something that may help. There has long been bitter hatred between Kempak and the high priest Ankatta, hatred which the other guardsmen share. The bodies are lying in the sacred grove. If I go first to the soldiers, I may be able to convince them one of the priests committed the crime—."

"And maybe they won't even close the city gates!" he finished swiftly. "An excellent ideal! Meantime, I know of only one place to hide!" With his usual swiftness of decision he turned, and before she had the chance to say another word was running silently as an

animal into the gloomy depths of the wood.

When he was gone, she was conscious of so heavy a weight of misery in her breast that it threatened to stifle her. Did he not realize on how weak a reed he was leaning? Could she, and she alone, be a match for the minds and cruel strength of the soldiers? Yet he had trusted her, and after moments of painful indecision she forced her lagging feet to the head of the grove.

When she came there a new and unpleasant surprise was in store for her. As she had anticipated, a little company of soldiers was approaching on the double, headed by a man named Calatta, whom she recognized because he had visited now and then at the House of Kempak. But, as she had not expected, another group of men was also in view, dressed in the green robes of the temple novitiates, and headed by none other than Ankatta himself. They, too, were approaching at an unusually rapid pace, and she guessed that the priests with their secret devices had intercepted one of the messages of the soldiers, and were determined to find out for themselves what form of mischief was afoot in the sacred grove.

The two companies arrived at about the same time, each carefully ignoring the other. It was

Calatta who spoke first, his voice gruff and very unfriendly:

"I just saw you come from the grove, girl. Speak up! What have you seen there?"

"I have been a witness to a terrible thing! I—I—" The unforeseen advent of Ankatta had confounded her completely, and she was unable to continue.

"This shows the result of the military training," interposed the high priest in a sharp, authoritative tone. "You have the manners of an animal, Calatta. Was it necessary to frighten the girl?"

"Tell me what you have seen there," repeated the soldier, this time more moderately.

Because she had not wit enough to think of anything else, she burst forth with the story she had already prepared: "I was walking near the grove, when I saw my master Tes Kempak and one of his men enter. I followed curiously. Two men were waiting there, dressed in the robes of the temple novitiates—it was like a pre-arranged meeting." She did not dare look toward Ankatta, or any of them. "They talked. I saw Kempak shake his head violently, and it seemed to me he was growing angry. Then one of the green-robed men drew forth a strange device from under his coat, raised it—and I saw the bodies of both Kempak and the other convulse suddenly, and fall

to the ground. I turned and ran."

Her story had sounded awkward and insincere to her own ears, but when she gained the courage to raise her head, there was a look of eagerness in Calatta's eyes.

"I have heard stories of strange weapons the priests carry under their robes," he said. "Indeed, it is common talk. Yanna, Garn—" He turned to two of his men. "—search the grove."

Ankatta's face held no anger, merely great wonder. "There is something in this I do not understand," he muttered. "It is entirely beyond belief that two of the novitiates would do such a thing without—without—"

"Without authority from you, would you say?" interrupted Calatta smoothly. "I could hardly disagree on that."

"I can see that it will be necessary to have the girl questioned by the servants of the Flame," continued the old man reflectively, "in order to weed out the kernels of falsehood from the truth in her story."

"Deliver the girl over to the custody of those who may be suspected of the crime?" asked the soldier contemptuously. "That would be clever indeed." As he spoke a communicator-device attached to his helmet began to sputter, and he listened for a time. From the look of rage and venom

that came over his features, Luena knew that the two soldiers he had sent into the grove had discovered the bodies.

"What the girl says is partly confirmed," said Calatta. "Two men are dead, one of them our leader—and the manner of their passing was very strange."

Ankatta seemed to waken for the first time to the gravity of his peril. "This is a scheme of the palace guard to provoke hatred against my loyal servants!" he exclaimed furiously. He reached inside his robe, and the guardsman in an answering gesture pulled a small-arm halfway from its holster.

For a long moment the two men stood there; and indeed the entire group was frozen into a silent tableau, pregnant with menace. The quarrel in the offing, had it been allowed to take its natural course, might conceivably have worked well for the fortunes of the girl. But it was her own weakness that marred the fulfillment of her careful plan. The past years of misery and subservience, combined with an overpowering consciousness of her present danger, took their toll. Losing her head completely, she turned and ran in panic.

Her action had the worst possible effect, as she discovered when a semblance of reason returned and she looked behind.

The two companies, after the first moment of mystification had passed, had united in the face of the common problem, and two men from each group had detached themselves and taken up the chase. They were moving along at an easy lope, making no effort to use their weapons or overtake the fleet-footed girl, as they knew the pursuit could have only one conclusion.

The feeling in her breast was one she had known only too often before. She was panicked completely due to an abject terror of the unfeeling, brutalized people around her, and she felt that she must run, run until her lungs burst and her legs failed beneath her. Yet she knew at the same time that her flight was a hopeless one, because there was no place of refuge.

She occasionally passed some of the citizens of Taal, as her path led near the parade grounds on the outskirts of the city. They looked after her curiously, but she knew that none would intercede. The people of Taal had long since learned to keep well away from any business the soldiers were engaged in. She was making instinctively for the Kempak properties, and after crossing a small bridge she turned into the first gate which looked familiar, which happened to be that of the Kempak Gardens.

She was at once confronted by a sight that was unpleasant yet welcome at the same time. Sean Tulley was there, crouched on his haunches beneath the dubious shelter of a bramble bush. On the instant he saw her he arose.

It was evident that he was totally unaware of the clamor outside. He said wryly, "When I stood up the bush pecked me. When I sat down the flowers pricked me. So I compromised."

When he had spoken of his "hiding place," it had not occurred to her to speculate concerning its location. Now by her cowardice she had betrayed them both. When she had regained her breath she told him what had happened, ending with the words, "It is as I told you. I am too much of a weakling."

"Now, don't you go worrying about it," he responded matter-of-factly. "It was a good idea—even if it went astray. Now it will have to be a fight—although I don't know where we can take cover in this stinking place?"

His words suggested a new train of thought, and she said suddenly: "I know of a way. Out of the Garden—perhaps even out of the city itself. But too dangerous for us to take."

"What are you talking about?" he asked eagerly.

"It is a pity that the way is closed to us. But come, I will

show you." She led him to one of the cages of the giant cabbages. Inside was one of the usual fat, sluggish monsters, but this one was leaner than its fellows, and its leafy mantle had a yellowed and decadent look.

"This is something I discovered only two days ago — and which I believe even Tes Kempak didn't know. You see that cabbage? The body inside the cloak of leaves has succeeded in eating its way down through the wire flooring of the cage. It is probably burrowing its way to join its wilder brethren in the swamps. I looked inside the cage—I know it is gone."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Tulley. "How do we get into the cage?"

"I have a key. I am one of the gardeners." She fumbled at her pouch, and the pirate at once took the sliver of metal from her hand, opened the cage door.

She was beyond making any further protest. She was well aware that Tulley's resolution and valor were founded upon his complete ignorance of the nature of the creature that might be in wait for them, somewhere in the ground below. Yet, since no path before her offered any hope for salvation, she might as well take the one as the other. She merely watched as the man ran swiftly along the causeway, opened all the other cages.

"That will give them something to think about—in case they get too anxious about us," he said, returning. "Come along now."

He locked them both in. The girl, standing before the sticky, noisome hulk of greenish-yellow leaves, was again irresolute. It was not until there were sudden noises at the gate of the Garden that she bolstered up the ragged remains of her courage, pushed her way through. Instantly she was falling, or rather sliding, down a warm, muddy incline.

She came down upon her hands and knees in semi-darkness and in mud. Fortunately there was enough space here, and the dark opening that bulked ahead, although uninviting, was ample. When Tulley came plunging down she was crawling onward.

She was dismayed to discover that it led downward. Had the tunnel been a smaller one, so that the warm mud with its suction-like powers could have attached itself to her entire body instead of merely to her hands and knees, progress would have been impossible. As it was, the going was heartbreakingly slow, and there were times when the stale air threatened to overcome her.

Later on she could not remember many of her thoughts during the nightmare journey. She did not allow her mind to dwell on what might be behind, and in-

deed no sound came from that direction, save once when there was a high-pitched screaming, very far in the distance. She did not speculate upon its origin. Her one clear recollection was the time when the tunnel took an upward slant, and that moment of wild hope when there was a glimmer of light ahead.

She pulled herself out moments later, and came to her feet on a surface that was blessedly firm and had many rocks in it. She was in a cavern. Tulley was at her side almost at once, and both of them realized their good fortune. There were dark openings in the side of the cave, and they had no doubt that the burrowing monster had created one of them in its search for freedom. But there was also the cave-mouth, round with light and barely fifty feet ahead, and they made toward it.

The danger that came was the more terrible because it was unexpected. It looked like a great rock at the side of the cave, immobile and dirty-white in color, with what might have been cracks along its surface but which were actually large veins. Its strange sensory system had no doubt given it warning of the approach of intruders, and caused it to remold its amorphous bodily organism into the semblance of a rock. Only when they were very

near did it bloat up suddenly, and fall toward them.

Luena screamed and stumbled backward. Tulley, who was not to be taken off guard, had his gun in his hand and discharged it in the same second. The cabbage, in the interest of its camouflage, had also caused its cells to take on the attribute of solidity, one which they did not normally possess — which was lucky, because otherwise the weapon might have had no effect at all. As it was, so great was the power of the monster that there was an awful moment when it seemed as if it would succeed in making its way through the tremendous aura of force, then it began to recoil.

Immediately afterward the two Earth-people witnessed a strange sight. The vegetable, in its effort to pierce the waves of energy, had literally been sliced to ribbons, and the many parts of its body were strewn about the floor. Luena, watching with trepidation, recalled descriptions she had heard of attributes of the curious creature. As if in answer to her thought, the segments on the floor bloated themselves ferociously and, all the parts exhibiting the same qualities of life as the whole, began crawling.

"Like shooting fish in a barrel!" said Tulley. And the entire cavern became filled with acrid, stinging smoke as he discharged his weap-

on again and again. Luena, too, pulled out her Carnac and fired wherever she saw movement. After several minutes of this both sprang forward and ran toward the mouth of the cave.

At the moment that they came to the opening the strain of what she undergone threatened to overcome the girl, and Tulley, sensing her need, put his arm around her. The last sight she recalled as he swung her into his arms was the floor of the cavern, which was literally covered with little blobs of different sizes, like little worms, all of them inching relentlessly forward.

Then she blacked out entirely.

When she recovered consciousness Luena was prone on a hard surface with rough edges to it, and her body was being rocked back and forth. Above her were tall red things, that waved about as if straining for a look at her. She lifted herself to her elbow and saw that she was in a boat, with Tulley crouched over a small engine, and that the red things were the flowers which rimmed the bay near Taal city.

Tulley, seeing that her eyes were open, gave her a sympathetic smile. "You don't have to worry any more. Soldiers, cab-

ages and priests—they're all far behind us."

There were still anxious moments, however, while the boat wrestled its way strenuously through the stubborn flowers. During this interval her mind went irrelevantly to an entirely new subject.

"Sean Tulley, when I am with your people will I be a free woman or a slave?"

"A slave, of course!" he said with surprise. "As a captured woman, you will be required to obey without question any orders I may give."

"I don't think I would ever obey you in that fashion!" she pouted.

"Now, that's peculiar," said Tulley, and although she could not see his face she guessed that he was smiling. "None of the other women slaves ever do, either."

At this moment the boat burst through the last of the flowers, and the unimpeded power of its engine carried them as swiftly and lightly as a bird into the free waters beyond. Luena was being borne into an entirely new world, to be the slave of an Oberara pirate — and she was wildly, gloriously happy. * * *



THE

by Robert Abernathy

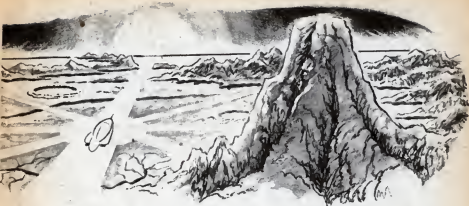
YALMAR GUNN leaned over the table and shook his large, hairy fist in the little Scientist's mild face. The gesture was pure drama, but, Norry Falk told himself, obviously Gunn was a man of dramatic gestures.

"By the stars," he bellowed with all the ferocity at his command, "you'll hand it over, or I'll lift my ship tonight and blow your deleted city to atoms!"

The two other men at the council table in the Perkunian

tower chamber held their breaths. For that matter, Norry Falk, Savant Twens Dalen's thirty-year-old assistant, had been holding his consistently since the space captain's voice had begun to rise and he had taken to fondling his flame pistol. Now even the hard-faced lieutenant whom Gunn had brought with him to the meeting removed his pipe from his mouth and seemed to grow tense.

Falk eyed bitterly the captain's



CAPTAIN'S GETAWAY

**BOLD WAS THE CAPTAIN, PIRATE OF THE VAST
INTERPLANETARY SPACES...BUT THE SCIENTIST WAS BOLDER!**

holstered gun; in view of the growing distrust between the men of Science City and the crew of the *Fomalhaut*, there had been a no-weapons clause in the terms for the parley. Ridiculous, perhaps, since the warship's guns completely commanded Science City from its berth out on the airless surface. But Falk wished ardently that he had smuggled in at least a small needle-gun on his own account.

Twens Dalen, blinking a little

at the large fist as the other let it fall, still clenched, was speaking, with a choice of words which betrayed a passion for precise statement. "It is not a question of those alternatives, Captain," he said quietly. "If Science City must be blown to atoms, as you put it, it will not be by your agency."

"What the hell do you mean?" Gunn scowled with all his big blond face. He had once been accustomed to be polite—almost

silky, in fact—with the personnel of captured cargo or passenger vessels in the depths of space; but those had been occasions on which he had held all the cards. Now his nerves were on edge; before he had left his bridge to come to the parley, he had rechecked a certain set of figures on the calculator, and the results might have shaken even a better balanced individual.

Dalen blinked again; but a little of his studiously courteous manner fell from him as he spoke. "I'm aware, Captain Gunn, that you are the representative of no stellar government whatsoever; in short, you are a private. Furthermore, your ship escaped to Perkunas after a brush with a Bellatrician patrol cruiser in deep space, and you believe yourself to have been pursued. You have calculated the time required for the patrol ship to change course; it should arrive within twenty days."

As the pirate, silenced for once, merely stared at him, the Savant explained gently: "You see, Captain, Perkunas, though technocratically governed and devoted to the pursuit of pure science, has its working classes and its taverns—where some of your crew on leave saw fit to talk."

The Scientist's circumlocutions had given Gunn time to recover his wits. Without moving, he

said sullenly, "Okay, Doc, so you can't be kidded. But I'm not trying to kid you when I say that unless you hand over that deleted space drive, I'm going to get sort of rough with a few atomics. You know now just why I've got to have it."

There was a deadliness in the last statement that made young Norry Falk wish even more urgently for a needle-gun. It might just be possible, he reflected, to snatch the pirate's own weapon from its holster and use it . . . But the timidity of one born and bred as a comrade of Science on isolated Perkunas, with its scant million of people and its poverty-engendered immunity to raids and strife, held him back.

Dalen said, "You seem to hold the illusion, Captain Gunn, that you are in a position to dictate to me—to our planet. That is an error."

"And what do you mean by that?" demanded Yalmar Gunn, his cold blue eyes narrowed.

Dalen did not answer at once. Instead, head bowed, he was examining his wrist watch, an elaborate radium timepiece; he seemed to be adjusting it. At last, still concealing the dial from Gunn, he raised his eyes and said expressionlessly, "I frequently use this chronometer as a timer for certain mechanisms. At present, the vibration frequency

which it emits is keyed to a single control in my laboratory*directly beneath this tower. If the chronometer is not set back, once every three hours, to a certain definite point, this control will automatically disintegrate the five tons of radioactive copper which form our power reservoir." He paused, then added, with a touch of apology, "An elementary device for purposes of personal security. I cannot claim that it has any scientific merit."

He did not need to add that such an explosion would blow not only Science City, but most of the planet of Perkunas, and the ship *Fomalhaut* along with it, quite literally to atoms.

By a Herculean effort, Norry Falk kept his face immobile. That was necessary, for if he had allowed anything to show there Gunn's alert, fox-faced lieutenant might have read from his expression that there was no such control as Dalen had mentioned—indeed, no five tons of atomic copper buried under Science City. And had there been, the gentle chief of the Perkunian Scientists would never have gambled with a million lives, even to save his most precious secrets.

But Captain Yalmar Gunn took the threat at face value, for the moment, at least, and on that basis he thought very fast indeed. He was motionless for one stag-

gered moment—. Then, with a roar, the blond pirate lunged headlong across the small table, seized Dalen's left wrist in a bruising grip, and twisted it savagely until he could see the chronometer dial.

In almost the same fraction of time, his companion, pipe still in mouth, moved like a rattlesnake to seize Gunn's flame pistol from its holster and train it on Norry Falk, pinning him, as it were, against the chair in which he sat.

For a few seconds they were a tableau. Then, with a satisfied grunt, Gunn released the Scientist's wrist, almost thrusting him over backward, and straightened up. He whipped a stylo from a pocket of his jacket, and fumbled in another pocket for a scrap of paper.

The slight, gray-haired Savant massaged his wrist and said something under his breath which might have been a credit even to Gunn's vocabulary. Then he controlled his breathing and said quietly, "I shouldn't trouble to write down that reading, Captain. Too much time has already passed—. And even if your time-sense were perfect enough to permit you to make exactly the proper allowance for the time since I set it last, the chronometer is adjusted to run at a varying rate requiring three factors for its determination."

If Gunn had been even half a scientist instead of a credulous swashbuckler, he would never have swallowed that. But after one indecisive moment it was plain that he had. He glared, crumpling his paper in one huge fist.

Then he said the obvious thing—said it with a bravado which proclaimed him uncertain: "You won't do it. You won't blow your whole deleted planet to hell just to keep me here."

"I wouldn't do it," said Twens Dalen gravely, "merely to keep you on Perkunas. I assuredly don't want you here. But in view of your threat to blast the city, I cannot allow you to lift your ship."

Gunn revolved the situation for a space, biting his lips painfully. It was, after all, a business he could understand. The old match-over-the-powder-barrel business. If a man thinks he has to die in one of two ways, he will choose that by which he may take his enemy with him. In fact, Gunn had heard of a rather similar case, which had ended unfortunately for all concerned—in the explosion of the old-line battleship *Virgo*.

Men are always the same in a pinch, and even this gray-headed, milk-and-water Scientist might be reluctantly classed as a man. Moreover, Gunn had the common

conviction that Scientists as a rule are cold-blooded devils—the sort who would blow up a planet as unconcernedly as he would blow his nose.

"It comes to this," said Dalen. "You cannot possibly leave Perkunas without my permission. I cannot afford to grant you that permission. We seem, Captain," he added thoughtfully, "to be seated on opposite horns of a dilemma."

Gunn, who most passionately did not wish to die, never thought of mentioning that he had nothing else to lose, since if the Bellatrixian patrol caught him they would certainly vent certain grudges against him in a very signal manner. Instead, he suggested, with the air of one proffering a very small coin: "Suppose I give you my word I won't blast you if you let me lift?"

"I'm afraid," replied Dalen regretfully, "that that wouldn't be quite adequate."

Norry Falk, watching the two principals in the meeting like a hypnotized bird, wondered how much longer this could go on. He also wondered how much more of it his nervous system could stand. It seemed impossible that either the pirate or his sly-looking lieutenant could long fail to see through the bluff.

Feeling his facial expression unable to hold up under the

strain, he half turned to look out through the double windows of the tower chamber, from which an excellent view of Perkunas' surface showed a vista of red-lit desolation awesome even to one who had known it all his life. As an excuse for his action, the raider *Fomalhaut* lay out there, a long, gleaming giant on the runway three miles away.

It was while he stared glumly at that, trying to calm the jangling of his nerves, that the import of Dalen's next words hit him.

"In spite of all difficulties, Captain," said the master Scientist, "I think we may be able to reach a compromise. As a man of Science, I have nothing against you and no interest in your quarrels with the government of Bellatrix or of any other system. Therefore—while I repeat that I must refuse to give you my space drive—I am willing to sell it to you."

Falk spun around from the window. The two pirates remained as they were—Gunn still standing, with hard knuckles resting on the polished plastic tabletop.

Hope and suspicion gleamed across his florid face. "What's the catch?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I'm not trying to trick you," said Dalen with asperity. "I'm offering to sell you the space drive, exactly as I described it to you on the day of your arrival—when I

still believed you to be a legitimately-authorized ship's captain—in return for the supply of fuel which you have aboard the *Fomalhaut*. I understand that amount to be some twelve tons—a quantity which will serve admirably in a series of experiments which I contemplate. Naturally, I am otherwise motivated to make this offer by the mutual discomfort of our circumstances."

Gunn thought hard. He was accustomed to put two and two together rapidly — though more complex operations left him baffled—and he did it now.

"Before I make any bargains," he said cautiously, "I like to know what I'm getting." He laid two blunt fingers on the table in front of the Scientist. "One: Even if I've got the space drive, how do I get away from the deleted Bellatrixers without a deleted gram of fuel? And Two—" He hesitated. Then, convinced that his opponent held most of the cards, he threw his own down, face up. "How do you figure on making sure I don't go ahead and give you the double-cross anyway?"

Twen Dalen showed his disgust at the pirate's crudity. He almost snorted. "You don't appear to have listened to my first description of the space drive," he said acidly. "If you had, you would be aware that no power is required for its use—."

Gunn had started pacing to and fro, pushing his chair out of his way with a nervous irritability in sharp contrast to the collected coolness of the aging Scientist. He interrupted, "Yeah, you said that. Practically a perpetual motion machine. I'm no physicist, but I know damn well there's a law of conservation of energy!"

"If you don't believe that the space drive will work," answered Dalen coldly, "you don't want it."

Gunn made a distracted gesture. He glanced out toward where his ship lay on the lava plateaus under the red light of the sun; but he saw instead the armed fury that was the Bellatrix patrol cruiser, less than a hundred billion miles away now, flinging itself toward the Perkunian sun at a speed not far from that of light. Decelerating now, on the scattered track of ions left by his own deceleration. They already knew that he had headed for the red dwarf star, either to land on its single planet or to lose himself in its electrical aura. They would know where to find him . . .

He cursed the Scientist briefly but violently, and said, "I want it."

"Very well . . . I will add a little to my former explanation: Briefly, the space drive requires no energy, and the effective velocity attained by its use is infinite. To understand this statement in its en-

tirety, you would need to have an understanding of the trepidational theory of universe-building, with its corollary of the energy-death . . . But perhaps, at least, you are familiar with Einstein's law of mass-velocity relationships." Gunn shook his shaggy blond hair, and with an effort said nothing. "Surely you are aware that the mass of a ship in flight varies according to its velocity," the Scientist went on. "At the theoretical limit—the so-called speed of light — its mass would be infinite; but to reach such a velocity you would have to expend an infinity of fuel. So far as Einstein knew when he formulated his theory, about a thousand Earth-years ago, nothing ever attained that ultimate."

"But, almost thirty years ago, Uttrell of Perkunas succeeded in demonstrating the existence in our own space-time of particles which move at the theoretical limit of velocity, and whose mass consequently is infinite. From the cosmological standpoint, of course, this indicates clearly that our Universe has entered the final stage of degeneration, and will in time cease to exist as we know it . . . For practical purposes, however, such particles represent a source of infinite power, only requiring to be tapped. That is what my space drive does."

"How?" demanded Gunn.

"The mathematical explanation is somewhat abstruse; you would find it quite incomprehensible. The gross effect is the establishment of a static field which transmits the energy of any particle striking it to all the matter within the field."

Now Yalmar Gunn's shrewd mind saw the implications, and he leaped at once to the point, with an abrupt fierce eagerness. "And you can set up a field to include the *Fomalhaut*?"

The Savant nodded casually. "Without any essential change in the mechanism, I am willing to deliver to you a complete working model of the space drive as soon as you have unloaded twelve tons of atomic fuel outside Science City. You won't be needing it."

Gunn hardly heard him, for all at once the tremendous possibilities of the space drive had begun to unfold themselves before him. Five minutes earlier, the end of his illegitimate career had seemed certainty. Now . . .

He saw himself become invulnerable, outrunning the fastest warships with ease, raiding at will into the very hearts of the peopled systems. He tried to keep the eager tremor out of his voice as he said slowly, "Okay, Doc. Any chance is better than none. You're on — if the deleted thing works."

"It works," said Twens Dalen flatly, and rose to close the conversation.

Gunn likewise stood up; then a thought stiffened him with suspicion. "Wait — a — minute! What about deceleration?"

"The field," Dalen informed him, "is directional and reversible. Naturally."

"Shake on it," said Gunn with satisfaction. The Scientist took the proffered paw not without distaste, and winced at the big brute's grip. The captain went on, "I'll have the fuel chargers unloaded by tomorrow morning — that's twenty kilochrons on this asteroid, isn't it? And I'll have my crew on board, if I have to sweep every gutter in Science City."

It was marvelous how, with an escape avenue in sight, the pirate captain became once more the roughly efficient leader of men. Twens Dalen smiled covertly, and even Norry Falk, on edge as he still was, could not but be amused at the manner in which Gunn began to fire orders at his fox-faced lieutenant before the two had started down in the tower elevator.

When the door had slid to, the two men of Science looked at each other and drew a deep breath apiece. Then, with one accord, they both glanced out over the city to where the *Fomalhaut*,

a gleaming and splendid thing of sky-piercing power, lay on the high plateau.

"That will be gone tomorrow," said Dalen, with deep relief.

Later, in Twens Dalen's lower-level laboratory, the two carefully went over the little machine—if the term "machine" can properly be applied to a stable complex of matter and of tangible and intangible forces—which was in essence a modification of Utrell's apparatus for the detection of high-speed photons.

The device, unused for half a dozen Perkunian years, was in perfect working order. Twens Dalen extracted a partly-fused metal coil from a scrap compartment, and placed it in the static field. His assistant finished setting the directional control for vertical, and activated that control. A whispering sound began as air sucked into the field. And the metal coil was gone.

A detector, however, had registered its departure in terms translatable by human eyes; the coil had gone straight up, with an instantaneous acceleration of the order of 200,000 mpsps — an acceleration which, simultaneously applied to its entire mass, must have left the coil still a coil, though it had passed without apparent hindrance through the solid ceiling of the laboratory and, some distance above it, the

airtight shell over Science City.

"It works," said Twens Dalen laconically. He crossed the room to a vision screen which was connected to every scanner inside or outside the city; a single adjustment brought the landing strip with the piratical visitor into view. The tiny figures of vacuum-suited men could be seen in the shadow of the huge hull, struggling in pairs with the weight of the thousand-kilo fuel chargers, a heap of which already rested in the plateau two hundred yards from the vessel. "Our plan also."

Falk shook his head ruefully. "Don't say 'our plan.' I had no idea what you were about until you offered him the space drive."

"It's for both of us to carry out, Norry," said the older Scientist. "I'm deputizing you to deliver the drive to Gunn—and to get away without being held as a hostage."

"Uh!" said Falk.

But he was cocky enough the next day, after his safe return from the pirate vessel.

"Nothing to it, after all," he informed the Chief Scientist, seated with a somewhat tense group of others before one of the large visiplates in the main relaxation room. Falk cast a glance at the screen, which showed the *Fomalhaut* still resting on the plateau in the dim red light of the early sun. "Just," he said, dropping into a comfortable chair and lean-

ing far back, "a matter of hiking out to the ship, tossing the space drive into Captain Gunn's eager clutches, and hiking back. He was so happy at getting his hooks on it that he didn't even consider detaining me, though I fancied there was one moment when he didn't feel too kindly toward me—when I told him he couldn't use the space drive to withdraw to a discreet distance and then turn his atomics on the city, because he'd be out of range before . . ."

He broke off, and with all the rest stared hard at the screen. An instant before the *Fomalhaut*, a thousand feet of gleaming niosteel, had lain out there; now the space ship was gone as if it had never existed, vanished like the metal coil in Twens Dalen's laboratory—at ultimate speed.

For a moment the assembled Scientists, awed despite their foreknowledge, gazed at the spot where it had been. Then as one man they rose and pounded each other on the back.

The captain of the Bellatrician patrol cruiser was a five-foot anthropomorphous robot. There are few men, save those of Gunn's type, who are willing to sever themselves from all human ties to

live the life of interstellar space.

It said, puzzled, "Am I to believe, Savant Dalen, that you have not only allowed the pirate Gunn to escape, but to escape with a weapon more potent than any yet invented?"

Twens Dalen shook his head brusquely. "He has escaped, yes, and you can never catch him. But the space drive is not a weapon; and Gunn will never come back to menace your shipping or anybody else's. You fail to understand, as did he, that infinite velocity means—infinite velocity."

The Bellatrician robot seemed puzzled, if lensed eyes can express bewilderment. "Indeed I fail to understand. You have said that the *Fomalhaut* escaped into space at the velocity of light."

The Scientist smiled. "That is correct. Gunn and his ship are now traveling at the limiting velocity of light. Therefore, according to Einstein's law, time no longer exists for them. They will traverse all of space-time in an instant.

"Gunn is alive and unharmed; indeed, he is immortal. He lives in an everlasting now which is the moment of his departure from Perkunas; and thus he will live—forever." * * *



Dick Shelton

D. P. FROM TOMORROW



by Mack Reynolds

**THE LITTLE MAN WAS
VERY SINCERE, VERY . . .
BUT THEN SO MANY OF
THESE GUYS ARE!**

THE PHONE rang and Ed Kerry picked it up and said, "Daily Star."

He listened for a moment and said, "Yeah," and then, "Hold on a minute." He stuck a hand over the mouthpiece and said to the city room at large, "It's one of these drunks settling some bet. He wants to know when Lord Byron died."

Sam, over on the rewrite desk, said, "He died on April 19th, 1824."

Kerry said into the phone, "He died April 19th, 1824," and hung up.

Jake, the city editor, had been leaning back in his swivel chair, his feet up on the desk. He said to Sam, "How do you know?"

Sam shrugged and said, "Just happened to."

Jake said idly, "Offhand, I can't think of any information that makes less difference than when Byron died."

Ed Kerry said, "It's the queerest thing in this business. Some jerk phones in and wants to know what caliber gun it was that killed Lincoln, or maybe how many molecules there are in a drop of water. And what happens? Somebody in the city room always knows the answer. It's the same on every paper I ever worked for."

Jake growled, "You can't tell them to go get lost. These characters who phone into newspapers at the drop of a hat might stumble on the biggest story of the year ten minutes later. You don't want them phoning some other paper because they're sore at you for not telling them who got in the first punch in the Dempsey - Firpo fight."

Kerry said, "Yeah, but what gets me is that when these jerks

ask their screwy questions, somehow or other they always get the right answer."

Somebody on rewrite said, "I remember once some drunk phoned in about four o'clock in the morning and wanted to know how tall Jumbo, Barnum's elephant, used to be. The guy who was working next to me says, 'Eleven feet, six inches,' without even looking up from the story he was on."

Jake said, "It's because on a newspaper you got a whole room full of guys with a lot of general knowledge. Remember back in the 1940s or 1950s or whenever it was, they had this 'Information Please' program on the television?"

Sam said, "It was radio back then."

Jake growled, "What difference does it make? Anyway, these guys knew all the answers and there were only maybe three or four of them, mostly newspapermen. In a city room you've got a dozen or more men who've read so much that it starts..."

The phone rang again and, since nobody else stirred, Ed Kerry sighed and picked it up again. He said, "Yeah?" He repeated that a few more times and then, "Hold it, Ted. I'll ask Jake."

He looked over at Jake and said, "It's Ted Ruhling. He's over at Leo's..."

"This is Ted's night off," Jake grunted.

"... He says he's got a refugee over there with a story," Ed Kerry finished. The phone was still squeaking and he put the receiver back to his ear.

"A refugee, yet," Jake snorted. "What's Ted got in mind? He must be sober; when he's drunk he's got more story sense. We've had so many Martian refugee stories..."

"This isn't a Martian," Kerry said. "It's a guy claims he's from another space-time continuum."

Somebody on rewrite said, "That does it. Now I've heard it all."

Jake began to say, "Tell Ted Ruhling to have himself a few more drinks and forget about... No, hold it. Tell him to bring the guy over here and we'll get the story. Maybe it'll be good for a humorous piece; besides, there's nothing going on anyway, we'll get some laughs."

Ed Kerry said into the phone, "It sounds like a real story, Ted. Jake says to rush the guy over here." He hung up.

Sam, over on rewrite, scratched himself reflectively. "I've seen a lot of stories in my thirty years in this racket, and I've seen a lot of stories about refugees. Refugees from Asia, refugees from Europe, refugees from South America and from Texas; even refugees from

Luna and Mars. But I'll be a *makron* if I ever heard of a refugee from another space-time continuum."

Kitty Kildare hustled from her tiny office and hurried breathlessly toward Jake's desk.

Ed Kerry said softly, "Kitty looks like she's got another world beater. Tear down the front page, Jake."

Kitty gushed, "Jake, I really have something for tomorrow's column. Actually, I mean. Jake, this..."

Jake held up a weary hand to stem the tide. "Kitty," he said, "listen. That column is yours; you can put anything in it you want. It's none of my business. For some reason or other, people even read it. Don't ask me why."

Kitty Kildare simpered. "Now, Jake, you're always pulling my leg."

Jake shuddered.

Kitty went on, "But you'll see tomorrow. Actually, I mean." She hustled out of the city room and off to whatever story she had found to cover for her column.

Ed Kerry said wonderingly, "Kitty can get breathless over any story hotter than a basketball score."

Jake said, "What's another space-time continuum? Seems to me I read about it somewhere, or..."

Sam laughed. "Now we know

Jake's secret vice. He hides in his room, locks the door, and reads science fiction."

The city editor scowled. "I don't get it."

Sam said, "Another space-time continuum is one of the favorite standbys of these science-fiction writers. You know. The general idea is that there are other, well, call them universes, existing side by side with ours. We aren't the only space-time continuum; we're only one of them."

"One theory is that there are an infinite number of continuums," Ed Kerry put in. "That means that somewhere everything is happening, has happened, and will happen."

Jake growled, "Shut up, Ed. Sam's explanation was getting bad enough, but . . ."

Sam said, "No. Ed's right. According to one theory, there are an infinite number of alternative universes, some of them almost identical to this one. For instance, in an infinite number of universes, Hitler won the second world war. In an infinite number of others, Hitler was never born. In still others, he spent his whole life as a paperhanger."

"Wait a minute, now," Jake said. "You mean to tell me that somewhere, in some other space-time whatever-y'call-it . . ."

"Continuum," Ed Kerry supplied.

"All right. Anyway, everything possible has happened, will happen, and is happening? *Everything*, no matter how unlikely?"

"That's the theory," Sam told him. "Consider, for instance, how improbable this space-time continuum in which we live really is."

Jake snorted, "Holy Wodo. Ted Ruhling has brought in some screwy stories in his time, but a refugee from . . ."

"Here he comes," somebody whispered.

"Okay, boys," Jake said softly. "The works. Somebody tell Jim to bring his camera."

Ted Ruhling wavered unsteadily toward the city desk, ushering along a little, wistful-looking character dressed in clothes that looked oddly out of style. The stranger's hair was going grey and his small face was much lined; he looked to be about forty.

Ruhling blinked at Jake and said, with considerable dignity, "This story is beyond the call of duty, y'realize, Jake. Oughta getta bonus. Wanta introduce Martin Cantine; refugee from another space-time continuum. Met him by accident in Leo's Bar." He slumped into a chair as though the effort of the introduction had exhausted him.

Jake got up and held out a hand to the little man. "Welcome to . . . uh, that is, welcome to our universe, Mr. Cantine."

Ed Kerry and Jim the photographer and several others crowded up with notebook and camera.

"Mr. Cantine," Kerry said excitedly, "what do you think of our space-time continuum's girls?"

"Shut up, Ed," Jake said from the side of his mouth.

But the little fellow answered seriously. "The same as I think of those in my own, of course."

Kerry said, as though disappointed, "You mean there's no difference?"

Martin Cantine found himself a chair, sat down, and said, earnestly, "I see that there must be some misunderstanding here. You gentlemen must realize that the continuum from which I fled was almost exactly like this one. Almost exactly. I note, for instance, that this city has identical buildings and in other ways is precisely like my own, except, of course, for the time element."

"Oh, oh," Sam said. "Here we go. The time element."

"What's different about the time element?" Jake asked cautiously.

The little fellow frowned worriedly. "I hope I can explain it to you. You see, the device which was constructed by my friends to enable us to flee our own period was designed to remove a living person from one space-time con-

tinuum and to place him in another. But it must be realized that in transporting ourselves to another *space* we at the same time, of necessity, transport ourselves also to another *time*. In all, we transport ourselves from another space, another time, and another space-time continuum. Actually, of course, the three are really one. Is that clear?"

"No." Ed Kerry said.

"Shut up, Ed," Jake growled. "Go on, Mr. Cantine."

Mr. Cantine was pleased that at least one person was following him.

"Our device was set to remove me only slightly in *space*, and, consequently, only slightly in *time*. If I am correct, my time was about ten years after yours."

Jake closed his eyes for a long moment. Finally he opened them again and said, "Let's have that last again."

"In my space-time continuum," the little man said, "I lived about ten years in your future. In other words, in 2030."

"I get it," Sam said. "Ten years from now our space-time continuum will be like yours when you left—in most respects; that is. What you did was travel backward in time for ten years and to a slightly different continuum."

Ted Ruhling had managed to stay awake thus far. But now that he saw everything was under con-





trol he muttered, "Bonus," and slumped forward on the desk at which he was sitting.

Jake looked at him and grunted bitterly.

Ed Kerry said, "Well, let's get the rest of the story. Why did you leave home and come to our fair continuum?"

Martine Cantine frowned. "I thought you realized that I was a refugee. Didn't Mr. Ruhling explain on the phone?"

"Of course," Jake told him. "Now just what were you a refugee from, Mr. Cantine?"

The little man took a deep, dramatic breath. "From Gerald Twombly, the most vicious despot the world has ever seen!"

Ed Kerry choked on that. "Twombly!" he said, trying to hold his laughter. He swallowed hard, then said, very seriously, "How do you spell that?"

"Gerald Twombly. T-W-O-M-B-L-Y," Martin Cantine told him. "And now that you have been warned, you'll be able to defend yourself against this scourge."

"I missed something there," Jake said.

The little refugee explained, "As I pointed out, this continuum is almost exactly like mine. The principal difference is that you are ten years earlier in time; Gerald Twombly is not as yet in power. You have time to fight him, expose his nefarious schemes."

"Twombly," Ed Kerry said. "I love that name. Hitler, Mussolini, Caesar, Napoleon—none of them quite have the ring of Twombly."

Jake looked up at the clock on the wall. They were going to have to start work on the bulldog edition. Besides, he was getting tired of this nut. He nodded his head to Bunny Davis, down at the other end of the room, and she surreptitiously took up a phone and called the city hospital.

Ed Kerry was asking, "Just what form will this despotism take?"

Martin Cantine leaned forward earnestly. "The most vicious and bloody the world has ever known. People have forgotten, it has been so long since dictatorship has existed, how ruthless persons in power can become to maintain themselves. We've also forgotten

that many of the devices that have been invented in the past one hundred years can be turned to horrible use by a police state. Truth serums, for instance, used ordinarily for psychiatry, but a terrible weapon in the hands of a secret police. Cybernetic-controlled wire and radio tapping devices that can listen to every conversation that takes place over instruments throughout the whole planet and immediately flash a report whenever anything the slightest degree removed from what is permissible is said. Radar . . ."

Jake yawned. "And just how did you manage to escape this guy . . . er, Twombly?"

Cantine frowned. "I am not the inventor of the S-T Invertor, but one of several who have been secretly removed to another continuum to escape Twombly's secret police. I am not exactly clear on the workings of the device."

"Shucks," Ed Kerry said. "I was afraid of that. Tell us what you do know about it." He was beginning to give up the pretense of taking notes.

Martine Cantine looked from one to the other, frowning. He was beginning to suspect the truth of the situation, and a red flush was creeping up his neck.

"I am afraid you gentlemen think I am exaggerating," he said tensely.

"I wouldn't exactly put it that way," Jake told him, stifling another yawn. "But part of it seems . . ."

The little man came to his feet, his expression tight. "I see," he said. He took a deep breath, then went on slowly, and very sincerely. "Even though you think me a charlatan, I beseech you, for your own sakes and for this continuum's — investigate this Gerald Twombly. You *must*. Or your space-time continuum will . . ."

Two white-coated interns came through the door and looked about questionably. Jake motioned to them and they advanced.

Jake said, a touch of unwonted kindness in his gruff voice, "Here are two friends of yours, Mr. Cantine."

The little man looked about him unbelievably. "But . . . but . . . you think I'm insane. You don't realize . . ." He shook off the hands of the interns, and spun about desperately to confront the city editor again. He began to shout, "But you must . . . Gerald Twombly! . . . You must . . .!"

They led him out, struggling.

There was an embarrassed silence in the city room. The gag had not been as amusing as they had expected.

"Well, let's get to work," Jake said. "Kerry, you see if you can do up a stick or so on this Cantine.

Gag it up a little, but don't go overboard. Jim, did you get a decent shot of the little guy? Those phony clothes he'd had made up for himself might make a . . ."

Sam, over on rewrite, said, "You know, the funny thing was that his story made a certain amount of sense."

Jake snorted. "Every nut's story makes a *certain* amount of sense. The only trouble is that, when you check it, it doesn't hold up."

"What'd'ya mean, check it?" Sam said argumentatively. "What part of Cantine's story were you able to check?"

Jake growled, "For one thing, this guy Twombly. What a name for a dictator. Anyway, who ever heard of a Gerald Twombly? Did you Kerry . . . Jim . . . Bunny . . . Sam?"

They shook their heads. So did everyone else in the city room.

Jake shrugged. "Okay. There you are. This character says that in ten years Twombly's dictatorship is going to be so rugged that we'll all be wanting to take a powder out of here to another what'd'ya call it?"

"Space-time continuum," Sam said grudgingly.

"Yeah. Well, none of us have

ever heard of him. Remember what I said earlier about all the general knowledge you find on a newspaper's staff? Okay, where's somebody that's even heard of this guy?"

"I guess you're right," Sam admitted. "But he seemed to be kind of a nice little duck."

"The nut factories are full of nice little ducks," Jake grunted. He tossed a story over to the rewrite man. "Here, shut up and get to work or you'll be getting as screwy as he is."

Sam grinned and took up a pencil. "Okay, Jake."

Kitty Kildare hustled into the room, brandishing a sheaf of paper. "Jake," she said breathlessly, "wait until you see my column tomorrow. I'll have them dying, *dying*. Actually, I mean."

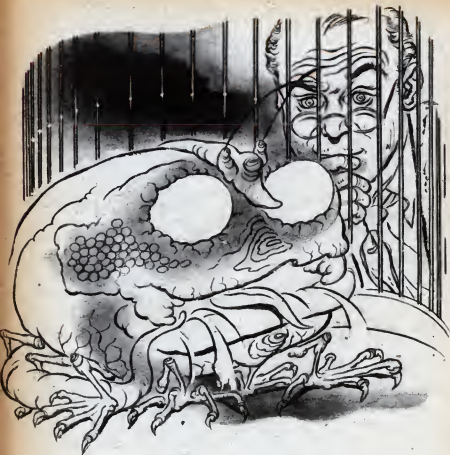
Jake shuddered. "Okay, what is it this time?"

She closed her eyes and breathed ecstatically. "A wonderful man; actually, I mean. I have the first interview he's *ever* given. He has a new political system he's advocating."

Ed Kerry said sarcastically, "I'll bet his name's Twombly."

Kitty turned and stared at him.

"How in the world did you know?" she said. . . .



Fritzchen

IT HAD once been a place for dreaming. For lying on your back in the warm sand and listening to the silence and making far-away things seem real. The finest place in all the world, for all the reasons that ever were.

But it had stopped being this long ago. Now, he supposed, it wasn't much more than a fairly isolated cove, really: a stretch of land bleeding into the river at one of its wide points, cut off like a tiny peninsula; a grey, dull place, damp and unnatural from its nights beneath the tidewaters—decaying, sinking slowly, glad to be eaten by the river. As Edna had put it: Just a lot of dirty wet sand. Not a place for dreaming anymore.

Mr. Peldo shifted his position

by Charles Beaumont

YOU NEVER MET ANYTHING

LIKE FRITZCHEN . . .

AND, BELIEVE US,

YOU WOULDN'T WANT TO!

FRITZCHEN

and sighed as he remembered. He took from his mouth the eviscerated end of a lifeless cigar, flipped it away distastefully, watched as the mud whitened and oozed where it landed and the spiders lumbered clumsily away in fright.

The spiders made him think of his snakes. And soon he was thinking, too, of rabbits and goldfish and ooo wow-wow puppy dogs, all flop-eared and soft, common as a blade of grass—and his bread-and-butter. His living.

He was almost relieved to hear Edna's coarse voice beside him.

"Jake."

She would now make some complaint about the foolishness of this whole trip, adding that it made her sinuses runny.

"Yes, Chicken, what is it?"

"Go and see to Luther."

Go-and-see-to-Luther. Eight-year-old kid ought to be able to see to himself, by God.

"All right. Where'd he go?"

"Somewhere over in that direction, there by the trees. I'm worried he might think of going in the water or get lost."

Mr. Peldo grunted softly as he pulled his weight erect. Exertion. Oh well, that was all right. Soon he would have started with the frustration, thinking about the lousy pet shop and his lousy life. Better to hunt in the trees for spoiled brats.

It was hard going. Had to end in a few yards, of course, but still, it *was* . . . exciting, in a small, tired, remembering way. He pushed aside a drenched fern, and another, needles of wet hitting him.

"Luther."

Mr. Peldo continued for a few feet, until he could distinctly hear the current. A wall of leaves rose at the curve, so he stopped there, let the last of the thrill fall loose from him, then listened.

"Luther. Hustle, boy."

Only the water. The vibrant, treacherous river water, hurrying to join the Sound and to go with it to the ocean.

"Hey, *Luu-therr*."

Mr. Peldo stabbed his hands into the foliage and parted it. From the window, by peering close, he could see his son's back.

"Boy, when your father calls you, *answer* him, hear!"

Luther looked around disinterestedly, frowned and turned his head. He was sitting in the mud, playing.

Mr. Peldo felt the anger course spastically through him. He pushed forward and stopped, glared.

"Well?"

Then he glimpsed what his son had been playing with. Only a glimpse, though.

"Fritzchen!" Luther pronounced defiantly, shielding

something in his hands. "Fritzchen—like I wanted to call Sol's birdie."

Mr. Peldo felt his eyes smart and rubbed them. "What have you got there?"

"Fritzchen, Fritzchen," the boy wailed. There was another sound then. A sound like none Mr. Peldo had ever heard: high-pitched, whiny, discordant. The sound an animal makes when it is in pain.

Mr. Peldo reached down and slapped at his son's mouth, which had fastened like a python's about the calf of his left leg. Then, by holding his thumb and forefinger tightly on Luther's nose, he forced him to drop the thing he had been hiding.

It fell onto the slime and began to thrash.

Mr. Peldo gasped. He stared for a moment, like an idiot at a lampshade, his mouth quite open and his eyes bulged.

A thin voice from across the trees called: "*Jake is there anything wrong? Answer me!*"

He pulled off his sport coat and threw it about the squirming thing. "No, no, everything's okay. Kid's just acting up is all. Hold your horses!"

"Well, hurry! It's getting dark!"

Mr. Peldo blocked Luther's charge with his foot.

"Where did you get that?"

Luther did not answer. He

glowered sullenly at the ground, mumbling. "He's mine. I found him. You can't have him."

"Where did it come from?" Mr. Peldo demanded.

Luther's lower lip resembled a bloated sausage. Finally he jerked his thumb in the direction of the river bank.

"You can talk!"

Luther whimpered, tried once again to get at the wriggling bundle on the sand, sat down and said, "I found him in the water. I snuk up on him and grabbed him when he wasn't looking. Now he's mine and you can't have—."

But Mr. Peldo, having recovered himself, had plucked off the coat and was staring.

A place for dreaming.

Roadsters that would go over two hundred miles per hour. Promontoried chateaus with ten bathrooms. Coveys of lithe young temptresses, vacant-minded, full-bodied, infinitely imaginative, infinitely accessible . . .

"JAAAAke! Are you trying to scare me to death? It's cold and my sinuses are beginning to run!"

Luther looked at his father, snorted loudly and started for the trees.

"He's Fritzchen and he's mine!" he called back as he ran. "All right—I'll get even! You'll see!"

Mr. Peldo watched the small creature, fascinated, as all its legs commenced to move together,

dwarfed, undeveloped legs, burrowing into the viscous ground. Shuddering slightly, he replaced the coat, gathered it into the form of a sack and started through the shrubbery.

Edna's nose had turned red. He decided not to show Fritzchen to her, for a while.

"Got no empties," Sol said slowly, eying the bundle Mr. Peldo held at arms' length. Sol didn't care for animals. He was old; his mind had fallen into a ravine; it paced the ravine; turned and paced, like a contented baboon. He was old.

Mr. Peldo waited for Edna and Luther to go around to the living quarters in the back. "Put the capuchin in with Bess," he said, then. "Ought to have a stout one. Hop to it, Sol, I can't stand here holding this all day."

"'nother stray?"

"You—might say."

Sol shrugged and transferred the raucous little monkey from his carved wood cage to the parrot dome.

Then he looked back. Mr. Peldo was holding the jacket-bundle down on a table with both hands. Whatever was inside was moving in violent spasms, not the way a dog moves or a rabbit. There were tiny sounds!

"Give me a hand," Mr. Peldo said, and Sol helped him put the

bundle, jacket and all, into the cage. They locked it.

"This'll do for a while," Mr. Peldo said, "until I can build a proper one. Now mind, Sol, you keep your mouth strictly shut about this. Shut."

Sol didn't answer. His nose had snapped upward and he held a conched hand behind his ear.

"Listen, you," Sol said.

Mr. Peldo took his fingers off the sport coat, which had begun to show a purplish stain through.

"First time it ever happened in sixteen years," Sol said.

The silence roared. The silent pet shop roared and burst and pulsed with tension, quiet electric tension. The animals didn't move anywhere in the room. Mr. Peldo's eyes darted from cage to cage, seeing the second strangest thing he had ever seen: unmoving snakes, coiled or supine, but still, as though listening; monkeys hidden in far corners, haunched; rabbits—even their noses quiet and frozen—; white mice huddled at the bottom of mills that turned in cautious, diminishing arcs, frightened, staring creatures.

The phlegm in Mr. Peldo's throat racked loose.

Then it was quiet again. Though not exactly quiet.

Sol quit his survey of the animals and turned back to the occupant of the capuchin's cage. The sport jacket glistened with

stain now and from within the dark folds there was a scrabbling and a small gurgling sound.

Then the jacket fell away.

"Tom-hell, jakel!" Sol said.

The animals had begun to scream, all of them, all at once.

"Not a word to anyone now, Sol! Promise."

Mr. Peldo feasted. He stared and stared, feeling satisfaction.

"What in glory is it?" Sol inquired above the din.

"A pet," Mr. Peldo answered, simply.

"Pet, hey?"

"We'll have to build a special cage for it," Mr. Peldo beamed. "Say, bet there ain't many like this one! No, sir. We'll have to read up on it so's we can get the feeding right and all . . ."

"You read up." Sol's eyes were large. The air was filled with the wild beating of birds' wings.

Mr. Peldo was musing. "By the way, Sol, what you suppose it could be?"

The old man cocked his head to one side, peered from slitted eyes, picked out the crumpled sport jacket quickly and let it fall to the floor. It dropped heavily and exuded a sick water smell. Sol shrugged.

"Cross between a whale," he said, "and a horsefly, near's I can see."

"Maybe it's valuable — you

think?" Mr. Peldo's ideas were growing.

"Couldn't say. Most likely not, in the face of it."

The chittering sound rose into a sort of staccato wail, piercing, clear over the frantic pets.

"Where in thunder you get it?"

"He didn't. I did." It was Luther, scowling, in his night-clothes.

"Go to bed. Go away."

"I found Fritzchen in the water. He likes me."

"Out!"

"Dirty stinking rotten lousy rotten stealer!"

Sol put his fingers into his ears and shut his eyes.

Luther made a pout and advanced towards Fritzchen's cage. The sobbing noises ceased.

"He hadda lock you up. Yeah. I was gonna let you loose again." The boy glared at his father. "See how he loves me." Luther put his face up to the cage, and as he did so the small animal came forward, ponderously, with suction-like noises from its many legs.

Mr. Peldo looked disinterested. He inspected his watchstem. Neither he nor Sol saw what happened.

Luther stamped his foot and yelled. The right side of his face was covered with something that gathered and dripped down.

"Luther!" It was Mr. Peldo's wife. She ran into the room and

looked at the cage. "Oh, that nasty thing!" She stormed out, clutching her son's pink ear.

"Damn woman will drive me crazy," Mr. Peldo said. Then he noticed that the shop was quiet again. Sol had thrown the damp jacket over Fritzchen's cage. There was only the sobbing.

"Funny!"

Mr. Peldo bent down, lifted the end of the coat and put his face close. He jerked back with abnormal speed, swabbing at his cheek.

There was a sound like a drowning kitten's purr.

Luther stood in the back doorway. Hate and astonishment contorted his features. "That's all he cares about me when I only wanted to be good to him! Now he loves *you*, dirty rotten—."

"Look, boy, your father's getting might tired of—."

"Yeah, well, he'll be sorry."

Fritzchen began to chitter again.

When Mr. Peldo returned to the shop after dinner, he found a curious thing. Bess, the parrot, lay on her side, dead.

Everything else was normal. The animals were wakeful or somnolent but normal. Fritzchen's cage was covered with a canvas and there was silence from within.

Mr. Peldo inspected Bess and

was horrified to discover the bird's condition. She lay inundated in an odd miasmatic jelly which had hardened and was now spongy to the touch. It covered her completely. What was more, extended prodding revealed that something had happened to Bess's insides.

They were gone.

And without a trace. Even the bones. Bess was little more than skin and feathers.

Mr. Peldo recalled the substance that had struck his face when he examined Fritzchen's cage the last time. In a frenzy he pulled off the tarpaulin. But Fritzchen was there and the cage was as securely locked as ever.

And easily twenty feet from the parrot dome.

He went back and found the capuchin staring at him out of quizzical eyes.

Luther, of course. Monster boy. Spoiled bug of a child. He had an active imagination. Probably rigged the whole thing, like the time he emasculated the parakeet in an attempt to turn it inside out.

Mr. Peldo was ungratified that the animals had not yet gotten used to Fritzchen. They began their harangue, so he switched off the light and waited for his eyes to accustom themselves to the moonlight. Moonlight comes fast to small towns near rivers.

Fritzchen must be sleeping.

Curled like a baby anaconda, legs slender filaments adhering to the cage floor, the tender tiny tail tucked around so that the tip rested just inside the immense mouth.

Mr. Peldo studied the animal. He watched the mouth especially, noting its outsized relationship to the rest of the body.

But—Mr. Peldo peered—could it actually be that Fritzchen was *larger*? Surely not. The stomach did seem fatter, yet the finely ground hamburger, the dish of milk, the oysters, sat to one side, untouched. Nor had the accommodating bathing and drinking pool been disturbed.

Then he noticed, for the first time, that the mouth had no teeth. There did not appear to be a gullet! And the spiny snout, with its florid green cup, was not a nose after all, for the nose was elsewhere.

But most curious of all, Fritzchen had grown. Oh, yes, grown. No doubt about it.

Mr. Peldo retired hours later with sparkling visions of wealth. He would contact—somebody appropriate—and sell his find for many hundreds of thousands of dollars. Then he would run away to Europe and play with a different woman every night until he died of his excesses.

He was awakened a short time

later by Sol, who informed him that the bird of paradise and one dalmatian pup had died during the night. He knew because he'd heard the racket from clean across the street.

"Oh, not the ooo wow-wow," said Edna. "Not the liddle puppy!"

Luther sat up in bed, interested.

"How'd it happen?" Mr. Peldo said.

"Don't know. No good way for definite sure." Sol's eyelids almost closed. "Their innards is gone."

Edna put her head beneath the covers.

"Fritzchen?"

"Guess. Y'ough't'a do somethin' with that crittur. Bad actor."

"He got out—that it?"

"Hey-up. Or somebody let him out. Cage is all locked up tight as wax, 'n it wailin' like a banshee."

Mr. Peldo whirled to face his son, who stuck out his tongue.

"See here, young fellow, we're going to get to the bottom of this. If I find out that you—"

"Don't think t'was the lad," Sol said.

"Why not?"

"Wal . . . that there thing is thrice the size t'was yesterday when you brung 'er in."

"No."

"No nothin'. Stomach's pooched out like it's fit to bust."

Mr. Peldo got up and rubbed his hand over his bald head.

"But look, Sol, if it didn't get out, and—Luther, you didn't let it out, did you?"

"No, ma'am."

"—then how we going to blame it? Maybe there's a disease going around."

"I know, I know," Luther sang, swinging his feet in the air. "His nose can go longer."

"Be still, boy."

"Well, it *can*! I saw it. Fritzchen did it on the beach—hit a bird 'way out over the water and he didn't move out of my hands."

"What happened to the bird, Luther?"

"Well, it got stuck up with this stuff Fritzchen has inside him, so it couldn't do anything. Then when it was all glued, Fritzchen pulled it back closer to him and shot out his nose and put his nose inside the bird's mou—"

Mr. Peldo felt his cheek, where the molasses had gathered that time. Both he and Luther had thought of it as an affectionate gesture, no worse than a St. Bernard leaping and pawing over you, raking your face, covering you with friendly, doggy slobber.

That's why Luther had gotten angry.

But Fritzchen wasn't being affectionate. It didn't work only because Fritzchen was too small, or they had been too big.

Mr. Peldo remembered Bess.

Edna poked her head out of the covers and said, "You listen to that! The neighbors will kill us!"

The sounds from the shop were growing stronger and louder and more chaotic.

Mr. Peldo dashed to the hall and returned with a telephone book. "Here," he said, tossing it to his wife, "get the numbers of all the zoos and museums."

"He's mine, he's mine!" Luther screeched.

Sol, who was old, said, "Jake, you never you mind about that. You just fished up something quaar, is all, and the best thing you can do is chuck 'er smack back where she come from."

"Edna—. Get those numbers, do you hear me? All the museums in the state. I'll be back."

The wailing had reached a crescendo now.

And Luther had disappeared.

Mr. Peldo put on a robe and hurried across the frosty lawn to the back door of the shop.

"Luther!"

The small boy had a box of kitchen matches, holding a cluster of these in his hands, lighting them and hurling them into Fritzchen's cage. The fiery sticks landed; there was a cry of pain and then the matches spluttered out against moist skin.

"Luther!"

"I wanted to be good to you," Luther was saying, "but then you hadda take up with *him*! Yeah, well, now you'll see!"

Mr. Peldo threw his son out the door.

The painful wail became an intermittent cry: a strange cry, not unmelodious.

Mr. Peldo looked into the great jeweled milk-white eyes of the creature and dodged as the snout unrolled like a party favor, spraying a fine crystal glaze of puce jam.

Fritzchen stood erect. He—it—had changed. There were antennae where no antennae had been; many of the legs had developed claws; the mouth, which had been toothless the day before, was now filled with sharp brown needles. Fritzchen had been fifteen inches high when Mr. Peldo first saw him. Now he stood over thirty inches.

Still time, though. Time for everything.

Mr. Peldo looked at the animal until his eyes hurt; then he saw the newspaper on the floor. It was soaked with what looked like shreds of liquid soap-jelly, greenish, foul with the odor of seaweed and other things. On it lay a bird and a small dog.

He felt sad for a moment. But then he thought again of some of the things he had dreamed a long time ago, of what he had

now, and he determined to make certain telephone calls.

A million dollars, or almost, probably. They'd—oh, they'd stuff Fritzchen, at all odds, or something like that.

"Dirty rotten lousy—."

Luther had come back. He had a crumpled-up magazine saturated with oil and lighter fluid. The magazine was on fire.

The monkeys and the rabbits and the mice and the goldfish and the cats and birds and dogs shrilled in fear. But Fritzchen didn't.

Fritzchen howled only once. Or lowed: a deep sound from somewhere in the middle of his body that seemed to come from his body and not just his mouth. It was an eerily mournful sound that carried a new tone, a tone of helplessness. Then the creature was silent.

By the time Mr. Peldo reached the cage, Luther had thrown in the paper and was squirting inflammable fluid from a can. The fire burned fiercely.

"I told you," Luther said, pettishly.

When the fire was pulled and scattered and trampled out, an ugly thing remained in the cage. An ugly blackened thing that made no noise.

Luther began to cry.

Then he stopped.

And Mr. Peldo stopped chasing him.

Sol and Edna in the doorway didn't move either.

They all listened.

It could have been a crazed elephant shambling madly through a straw village . . .

Or a whale blind with the pain of sharp steel, thrashing and leaping in illimitable waters . . .

Or it could have been a massive hawk swooping in outraged vengeance upon the killers of her young . . .

The killers of her young!

In that moment before the rustling sound grew huge; before the windows shattered and the great nightmarish shadow came into the shop, Mr. Peldo understood the meaning of Fritzchen's inconsolable cries.

They were the cries of a lost infant for its mother . . .

"Watcher of the Gate reporting to Yamara. Two men-things from above have climbed within the Walls, and one of them has just stumbled through the Gate."

"Report received. Continue your watch."

The graceful young woman stretched lazily, then concentrated curiously. She saw an enclosure of about an acre's extent, surrounded by a weatherbeaten wall. This, in turn, was concentrically surrounded by a similar but larger wall, thirty feet away.

Within the enclosure a slim, good-looking young man was staring with amazement at a sort of shimmering spot of light in the center of the encircled space. Even as she looked, he took a few rapid steps forward into the haze of light. Instantly he disappeared from the enclosure.

THERE WAS a moment of vertigo that wracked him; and then Fred Foxe fell to the ground—or rather, fell further than the ground on which he had been walking. About three or four feet, he guessed, as he picked himself up, unhurt but surprised.

He saw his companion, George Roberts, standing a few feet away, also apparently unhurt. The other was looking around him with a puzzled expression in his usually stolid face.

George turned and saw him.

"Fred," he said. "The walls—they're gone."

The statement startled Foxe, and he glanced back quickly. A feeling of consternation ran through his veins like a thread of ice.

He turned again and took one swift, comprehensive look about his new surroundings. He saw a little clearing, carpeted with a heavy growth of tall, rank grass of which every stalk bore on its tip a small, star-shaped blossom of some pastel color. There was jungle beyond, huge fern trees that spread intense gloom below them. The air was hot and steamy. An upward glance at the sun hanging low over the trees

GATEWAY to YAMARA

by E. Everett Evans

A STRANGE GATE LED HIM

GATEWAY TO YAMARA

shocked him. It was a swollen, blood-red sun. After a moment, he nodded to himself, and the sense of shock passed.

"Well," he said aloud. "We're where we expected to be — approximately."

Roberts turned slowly. "Yeah? Where are we, anyway?"

Fred smiled. "Just about where we were a minute ago, George. But ..." he added, "...I wouldn't say we were anywhere in Canada or the United States, or even in North America. Lord knows what this continent is shaped like right now."

"What in the devil are you talking about?" Roberts grunted im-

patiently. "Are we here, or aren't we?"

"Don't you see, George?" Fred said, his grin warm with victory. "We did it! We found the Time Gate — and we got through it! When I got you into this deal I told you the stories the Indians have been telling me — and this proves that they were right!"

Roberts looked around ruefully. "You got me into something, all right," he said. "These jungles look worse than the ones you dragged me through in the South Pacific. Think there are any Japanese snipers in those trees?"

"I doubt it," Fred smiled. "Old as the Japanese Empire is, it's not



TO A STRANGE FATE . . . AND AN UNDREAMED-OF NEW LIFE!

even a gleam in the Sun Goddess' eye right now."

"Right now! Right now!" Roberts said nervously. "You keep saying that! When is right now, anyway?"

Fred was thoughtful. "That's just it. When we passed through that shimmering spot of light back there inside the walls, we didn't travel very far in space, but I think we went a long, long way back in *time*. The Indian legends I've been listening to mentioned repeatedly a 'Time Gate' into which people disappeared, never to be seen again. And I think that spot of light was it."

Roberts, huge, stubborn fighter that he was, who had been cool and daring under enemy fire as Fred's patrol leader in the Pacific, shivered frankly. "It don't sound so good, does it?"

Fred looked at him grimly. "Sorry you came, Sergeant? I told you the score. You said my years of wandering around the Canadian hills for my doctor's degree in paleontology and listening to old Indian legends had sent me off my rocker, but you agreed to come looking for this place, anyway. You came of your own free will—so don't start griping now."

"Yeah, okay, Lieutenant," Roberts agreed grimly. "I ain't got nobody to blame but myself for listening to your crazy talk about time gates and wacked-up In-

dians." Then he grinned. "But I never was as smart as you was, so give it to me again—slow. Just where are we?"

"I think," said Fred slowly, "that Time Gate is a place where the Past and the Present meet; that when we went through it we went backwards in time a thousand or a million centuries. I'm positive we're now in some pre-historic age, but in the same geographical location."

"Ain't eddication wonderfull!" Roberts said witheringly. He looked around again, then exclaimed, "Hey, lookit the sun."

"I did. Eons ago the sun appeared much larger and redder than it does back in our normal time."

"You mean it really isn't any bigger?"

"No, it's just the refraction of this heavier, damper air that makes it seem so big. Like the moon does some nights. But, whenever or wherever we are, we'd better see about whether or not we can get back when we want to. I'm not particularly anxious to stay here the rest of my life."

"Gosh, me neither."

"The ground level is apparently lower than back in our time," Foxe said as they both turned and looked back. "I remember falling several feet when I came through. But I can't see anything to show

where the gate is, can you? No shimmer of light; no anything."

Roberts searched carefully. "Me neither." Then their situation seemed to penetrate. "Yipe! What a spot!" he groaned.

"Uh-huh!" Fred agreed.

There was a strained silence between them as they carefully examined the ground. Soon Roberts called, and Foxe joined him. They examined even more carefully a spot which showed some marks in the dirt, above the grasses and other weird vegetation had been crunched and broken.

"This must be where we landed." Foxe was feeling in the air with his hands as he spoke. Finding nothing, he picked up a rather long stick and tried with that to locate the enigmatic and illusive time fault through which they had fallen.

"Now, Yamara?"

"Wait! He intrigues me. He has passed the first barrier; he has scientific curiosity."

"Which one do you mean, Yamara?"

"Silence, stupid fool!"

"Well, that's that," Foxe said at last. "It appears we stay here for some time, at least. That being the case, we'd better fix us some sort of place to live in."

"Yeah, the afternoon's about gone. What kinda place?"

"All the jungle stories I've read seem to speak favorably of some sort of a tree-house. Find a couple or stout limbs that're parallel, build a floor across them with branches..."

"... and put up some sides and a roof, eh?"

"Sure. That puts you away from the larger ground animals, if any, and all you got to worry about are tree-climbing cats."

"Speaking of animals, how much ammo you got?" Roberts counted rapidly. "I only got thirty rifle shells, and a couple extra clips for my automatic."

"I have twenty-seven shells and four full clips," Foxe inventoried.

"And our hatchets and skinning knives. Boy, we'll have to be careful not to waste no shots."

They started across the clearing toward the jungle, searching for a tree large and strong enough for their purpose, yet easily climbable. Foxe, in the lead as usual, was intensely interested in the giant fern-trees, which so clearly showed him they were now in the Carboniferous age-period.

"There'll be coal and oil under and about those walls, in the present," he thought, then grinned to himself, "the old present."

The jungle was heavily undergrown with bushes, interspersed with fallen branches, rotting leaves and fronds from an incal-

culable number of preceding centuries, making the going tough. There was a riot of color everywhere, from millions of strange blossoms, which covered not only the ground but much of the trees as well. There were huge creepers or lianas that drooped from and made strange interlaced patterns between the trees.

Foxe was pleased to discover that he could still enjoy this breathtakingly beautiful scene, even while he was trembling inwardly at their dangerous predicament. He pushed resolutely on.

Suddenly he heard a groan and a curse behind him. Swiveling about, he recoiled at the sight of a tremendous snake, looped along the branch of a tree under which he had just passed. Its head and a dozen feet of its enormous body were swinging downward. Cold with sudden revulsion, he saw his friend struggling helplessly yet valiantly in its constrictive coils.

Wave on wave of sickness flooded Foxe, for he had a phobia against snakes. But he fought it down and, tugging his hatchet from his belt, ran forward toward the struggling man and serpent.

Roberts saw him coming and yelled, "Watch his head. Don't let him fang you!"

"Constrictors aren't venomous!" Foxe yelled back. He leaped onto the cold, writhing body. His hatchet slashed cruelly into the

reptilian body. Roberts' arms were so pinioned by the coils about him that he could not move to fight in his own defense, although his heavy-shod feet were kicking at the snake's body where he could reach it.

The huge python squirmed and twisted more swiftly, seeking now to envelope this new foe in its great coils.

Foxe kept chopping at the same time trying to keep himself from being encoiled. One of the evolutions of the snake freed Roberts' left arm. He quickly yanked his knife from its belt-sheath and joined Foxe in slashing at the great body.

It was hard to hit twice in the same place on that swiftly moving sinuousness. But they kept at it. Great wounds were beginning to sap the reptile's enormous strength. Its movements became slightly slower. The men's chopping and slashing blows were now more accurately placed. They managed to greatly enlarge one wound. Finally Foxe chopped completely through the backbone. He and Roberts concentrated on that spot, and soon cut through the huge body.

The severed section, still convulsively entwined about Roberts, and with Foxe clinging to it, dropped to the ground, where it continued its writhings. Aided by Foxe, the imprisoned man was

finally extricated from the horrid folds.

"You hurt?" Foxe gasped anxiously.

"Nope, just winded and squeeze." Roberts staggered away from the remains, and sank to the ground.

Foxe leaned against a nearby tree. "Snakes! Ugh! Hate 'em. To actually touch one . . . I never have thought I . . ." He was nauseatingly sick.

When at last he recovered a bit, Foxe saw Roberts sitting on the ground, silently watching, sympathetic.

"Looks like that tree-house idea ain't so hot," the big man said finally. "Especially if that baby's got any relatives. Maybe we better go back to the clearing, make a fire, and stand watches this first night. Tomorrow maybe we can figure out something better, eh?"

"You're right there. No more of this damned jungle for me during the dark. Me for the wide-open spaces."

"Now, Yamara? They destroyed Teffani!"

"Wait, I tell you! He had great physical and psychic courage. The second barrier could not stop him."

"Of what barriers do you speak, Yamara?"

"You would not understand.

Watch, protect, and do not molest!"

"I hear and obey!"

Beside a blazing fire, Fred Foxe stood looking about the deepening shadows of the unfamiliar world. A few feet away his companion lay stretched out in highly vocal slumber. They had dined on the last of their rations. It had been too late to think of hunting for meat, nor had they seen any small animals as yet at any time.

As soon as they had returned to the clearing, they started gathering a great pile of dry wood for their night-fire. Roberts carried the heaviest loads, although Foxe used his lesser strength just as vigorously. But soon he noticed that his huge companion was carrying smaller loads; that he was beginning to stop and rest frequently; that he often rubbed his sides as though to relieve a pain.

"Take off your shirt, George," Foxe commanded. "I want to have a look at you. That snake must've hurt you."

"Aw, it's nothing."

"Then I want to see nothing!" He helped remove the shirt, and gasped aloud at the great black and blue welts revealed.

"I take first watch, George, and no arguing," he snapped. "You lie down and get some rest and sleep. You're lots worse off than you'll ever admit. Those bruises aren't

going to heal in a few minutes, you know. Man, you've really been squeezed. Sure no ribs are broken?"

"Well, all right, Lieutenant," George agreed slowly. "No, there's no ribs busted. And you be sure and call me at midnight. I'm no sissy, Fred, and I can take . . ."

"Okay, Okay, I'll call you. Now pipe down. Make yourself comfortable and rest. One good thing, it's hot enough here so we won't catch cold sleeping on the ground without bags or blankets."

It was, indeed, humidly hot. Both men had long since shed the heavy mackinaws they had been wearing against the Canadian winter cold before they came through the Time Gate.

"One sleeps, Yamara. The other stands guard, but is drowsing."

"Watch and protect, but do not allow yourself to be seen."

"I do not understand your forbearance, but I hear and obey."

But Foxe was not drowsing. His eyes were continually darting about, watching closely his surroundings, even if his body was still.

A sudden movement, half-seen from the corner of his eye, roused him to greater vigilance. He wheeled to face it, his rifle at the ready. Just within the fringe of jungle growth he saw a dim,

wraith-like figure gliding noiselessly among the bushes and between the boles of the fern-trees.

Foxe threw more wood on the fire, then examined more closely this strange apparition in the light of the higher-leaping flames. This time he saw not one but a number of them. Slowly revolving his body he could now see them all around him, all moving so silently, seemingly aimless.

Yet the two men were completely surrounded.

Foxe stood perfectly still for moments, nervously watching. Slowly he lifted his rifle. He tried to pierce the gloomy depths to see more clearly who or what was out there. Several times he was on the point of waking Roberts, but each time withheld as the mysterious, spectre-like figures made no hostile move.

"Doggoned if I can make out whether they're men, animals or what," he muttered. The thought of ghostly spirits entered his mind, but he pushed it roughly aside. "I don't think they're men—those shapes are too amorphous for that. And if they're animals, they're like nothing I ever saw or heard of."

He strode forward with what he hoped was the appearance of boldness. "Might as well find out now as later," he grunted. The misty, phantom shapes did not seem to retreat before his ad-

vance, merely continued their apparently aimless moving about.

Suddenly the night air was rent with peal on peal of raucous guffaws that echoed among the trees and across the clearing, waking Roberts and bringing him to his feet with a bound, to find Foxe almost doubled up with laughter.

"What's up?" Roberts demanded, running forward, his gun ready in his hand.

"You are," Foxe replied at last, wiping the tears from his eyes.

"So now you can take over and let me get some sleep. Boy, that was the grand champion of all waking nightmares! Thought we were being surrounded by a ghostly army, and it's just those masses of drifting fog-mists.

"Aw, go get some shut-eye, you siap-happy sap."

"I intend to. How are you feeling now?"

"Okay. Plenty stiff and sore yet, but not as bad as I was. The rest did me good."

"It is afraid of shadows and dancing mists, Yamara."

"Yet now he sleeps calmly. It takes fineness of character and mental stability to overcome the barriers of the Unknown. The future race we seek must have those characteristics — and that delicious sense of humor."

Day woke up, yawned rosily,

and smiled upon the visitors from the far future. Riotous noises broke out from myriads of strange-looking birds. Whether they sang only at dawn, or the men had been too preoccupied to hear them before, was a question the two debated briefly.

After a breakfast of fruits which Foxe saw the birds eating, and so considered safe for human consumption, the men set out to search for water. A little gurgling brook not over a dozen yards into the jungle across the glade, provided not only this but also yielded some very fine fish which big George Roberts, happy at the chance to supplement his meagre breakfast, carried back to the fire and cooked. It tasted, but did not look like, trout.

"Well, we won't starve, at least," Roberts licked his fingers and belched contentedly as they stood on the bank of the stream once more.

"And this brook'll make a pathway for us to start our explorations," Foxe declared. He began to move upstream, and Roberts followed. As he pushed along, Foxe blazed several trees along the bank so that they could find their way back to the clearing of the Gate.

They had gone several miles, sometimes having to hack their way through walls of dangling branches, fronds or lianas.

Roberts was leading when they broke through a last wall of heavy growth to find that the narrow brook widened into a more marsh-like place, another semi-clearing.

Foxe saw Roberts striding forward even faster, but soon noticed that the big man was having increasing difficulty in lifting his feet each time he set one down.

"Stay back, Fred!" Roberts yelled suddenly. "It's quicksand, or something like that." He tried to turn back, but Foxe saw that even in the brief pause his companion had become mired nearly to his knees.

Foxe swiftly began gathering a quantity of large, fallen fernfronds and was laying them as a pavement when Roberts, twisting at the hips to look backward, saw him. "Stay out of here, you darned fool! No use you getting caught, too!" His own efforts to extricate himself seemed but to drag him in deeper.

"Stand still, Georgel!" Foxe commanded peremptorily. "You won't sink so fast if you don't struggle. I'll get to you pronto!"

But he didn't, for no matter how thick he piled his improvised paving, it would not hold his weight.

"Well, it was nice knowing you, pal," Roberts grinned, white-faced. By this time he was in nearly to his hips.

"Shut up, you dope," Foxe snapped, but there was a catch in his voice. "We're not licked yet."

Looking swiftly and purposefully about, he ran back towards the edge of the jungle. Clambering into a small tree, he hacked furiously at a long, tough liana with his hatchet. It took only moments to cut off a long section and this he carried back to the slough. It took several attempts, but he finally managed to throw one end so that Roberts could catch it.

Foxe dug his heels into the ground and started pulling. His face grew red, cords stood out in his neck, and his muscles ached with the strain, but the suction of the muck merely pulled the lighter man forward, rather than releasing the imprisoned man.

"Stand by to go to their aid, but wait out of sight."

"Why, Yamara? It is an easy way to be rid of them."

"You dare question me? Obey, instantly!"

"I guess it's no use, George," Foxe panted, his strength gone, his limbs trembling from the strain.

"Tie your end around a tree. I'll pull myself out."

Foxe did so, and the muscles on Roberts' powerful arms, shoulders and back stood out in ridges

as he put all his splendid strength into effect. Slow, heart-breaking moments passed as the tug of war continued. Inch by hard-fought inch Roberts was withdrawing his imprisoned body from the gripping quicksand. But that terrible constriction of the snake had taken toll of his vitality; his struggles became weaker and less successful long before he had released a quarter of his submerged body.

Desperately Foxe looked around him, trying to think of some method of more efficient leverage. His searching eyes noticed a slim but stout-looking tree that seemed more like the trees he knew than those other arbor-cous ferns. At once a childhood trick sprang into his memory.

"Got an idea, George! Slack off a minute!"

With a quick twist he unfastened his end of the liana and, holding it clasped firmly in one hand, climbed as fast as possible up the sapling. As he neared the top, it bent further and further beneath his weight. When he dared climb no higher for fear of breaking or splintering the trunk, he tightly tied the liana to it.

"Get set, George!" he yelled. "Be ready for the yank when I jump!"

"Right! Let 'er go!"

Glancing down to see that the way was clear below him, Foxe

yelled "Geronimo!" and sprang away and down from the bent-over tree. As it whipped back into place, Roberts was pulled clear of the sucking bog and lay, panting and winded, on the edge of more solid ground.

"He has loyalty, too, and resourcefulness. These, too, are characteristics the race needs."

Back in the clearing of the Gate, which somehow neither of them wanted to leave for very long, both men slept long and soundly that night, not bothering to keep watch. The great, swollen sun was well up into the sky when they finally woke and arose. A bath in the brook, and they ate ravenously, then made ready for the day's expedition, this time in the opposite direction.

This time Foxe led the way. They had gone less than a quarter of a mile when, through the foliage to their right, a building of some sort was glimpsed.

It appeared to be of the same sort of stone construction as the two great walls back in the Canadian woods, but not weathered and old as they were.

"What on earth is that?" Roberts gaped.

"I don't know," Foxe shook his head while he studied the strange structure. "Looks like it might be a castle. Or more probably," as

an afterthought, "a temple of some sort. But we certainly want to look at it."

"Well, what you waiting for? Let's get going."

"Yamara, they approach directly to the Place of Living."

"I observe. Test them. But do not kill!"

The two men had turned to wade ashore when a sudden noise stopped them. Almost at once a gigantic, lizard-like snout appeared, followed by a long neck and the forefeet of a huge body.

The thing stopped, too, as it spied them, then with a coughing grunt came on toward them at surprising speed.

"Back, fast!" Roberts yelled as he whirled and started back up the creek. "No room to fight here. Back to the clearing!"

Foxe was almost treading on the big man's heels in the retreat. Splashing, stumbling through the foot-deep water, they reached the glade barely a few yards ahead of their pursuer. As soon as they were on dry land they separated, and turned to fire.

"Aim at the eyes!" Roberts yelled again as they fired at the great head of the giant reptile. The beast was about forty feet long from nose-tip to end of horny-skinned tail. It stood about

fifteen feet high at the shoulders. The extended neck was carapaced, the head long and snouted, the open mouth exposing a large number of sharp-pointed teeth.

Their shots were hitting the monster, biting and *spanging* against its thick, bony hide, disconcerting it so that it seemed in a great state of indecision, turning first toward one and then the other of the men. Its movements were so erratic and swift that Roberts' idea of blinding it was not so easily carried out.

Both men were on the move every second, to escape the rushes of the huge dinosaur, its darting head, or its threshing tail. Its skin of bone-like, over-lapping plates or scales seemed to stop most of the bullets, although it was beginning to bleed in places.

Suddenly Roberts stumbled just as the thing was starting in his direction. Foxe saw him try to roll out of the way, but the giant also stumbled. A great foot stepped squarely on the man's head.

"George!" Fred Foxe howled in bitter anguish.

"Yamara, I . . ."

"I saw. It was accident. I do not condemn."

In a furious rage, Foxe started pumping bullets at the giant saurian. Then he steadied,

quickly, grimly, and with his shots tried to locate and puncture the heart or some other vital spot.

The huge reptile swung about and started in the direction from which that hail of stinging bullets was coming. Foxe ran to one side, then turned towards the rear of the monster. There was a tremendous *swish* of the great tail, which caught Foxe squarely in the side. He felt a wave of pain, then realized he was flying through the air. He landed with a shattering impact, and fainted.

"Yamara, the blow knocked him through the Gate!"

"I observed. Again I know it was unintentional."

"Orders, Yamara?"

"Do nothing, but get out of sight. He is of the breed that will return, for he has pertinacity of purpose. See, even now he awakes and is crawling back to the Gate."

"Then it were better to kill him."

"Silence, fool! He has the qualities the future race must have. And leave that other body alone until I give word to move it."

Fred Foxe came out of his dazed faint to find himself back inside the inner wall surrounding the Time Gate. Groggily he sat up, then crawled over to where he and Roberts had dropped their packs when they first

climbed down inside the inner wall. He carefully skirted the Gate in doing so.

From his own pack he got a bar of concentrated food and a can of fruit juice, upon which he lunched, shivering in the winter cold as he did so. When finished eating, he took a couple of anti-fatigue pills, then lit a cigarette. Getting out the first-aid kit, he applied antiseptic to and bandaged his various cuts and scratches, and taped his badly-sprained wrist.

Then he stood up slowly, looked around at the familiar Canadian woods, at the distant Rockies. At the foot of that peak was the Indian village they had started from—when was it? Days ago, weeks, a month? Beyond that stretched the long trail out of this little-explored region, and at the end of it, civilization, the modern world as he knew it.

He turned and looked at the shimmering light of the Gate. And beyond *that* lay the dead body of George Roberts, his buddy, who had fought at his side through so many dangers, only to end this way.

He picked up the two packs, pitched them through that enigmatic, shimmering Gate, then jumped through it. Expecting the drop, he landed standing.

His first task was to dig a grave in the soft loam at the edge of the

little clearing with a trenching shovel. In this he reverently buried the remains of his unfortunate friend.

"So long, fellow. You were a real man!" he saluted the long mound.

Making sure both rifles were loaded, he slung one over his shoulder, and with the other at the ready in his hands started once more down the little creek. His sharp eyes peered carefully about and ahead, lest he again be taken unawares by one of those fierce denizens of this primitive world.

"Yamara, he comes again."

"As I told you he would. He has every good trait of character that we desire. Your task with him is done. Return to your watch of the Gate."

"I hear and obey."

As he again caught sight of the now forbidding stone temple or castle, Fred Foxe left the little stream and proceeded more cautiously than ever towards the strange edifice. He climbed warily up the broad stone steps, and went slowly through the opened doorway. Inside he saw a fairly large, bare room, about thirty feet square, he guessed. Leading from it on the other three sides were hallways, empty, dim and mysterious.

He stood motionless, undecided as to which way to go first, when suddenly he had the strangest feeling, as though a will other than his own had taken charge of his mind and was forcing him to enter the right-hand hall. Down this he walked for about fifty feet, his curiosity keeping him from objecting to such cavalier treatment. Coming at last to a large wooden door, he opened it.

Instantly the strange mental control was withdrawn, and he gasped at the sight before him. This stone room was barbarically yet beautifully decorated with dozens of softly-tanned skins of various beasts, most of which he could not recognize, spread about the floor. There were huge hanging drapes and tapestries covering the walls, and brilliant flowers were strewn everywhere about the room. But his eyes noted those things only in one passing glance.

For in the center of the room was a stone bench or bed, covered thickly with more of the soft furs and with silken robes of various hues. On it half-reclined a girl or young woman, whose startling beauty held him rooted to the spot. There was something fascinatingly lovely about her.

"Her coloring!" he marveled then, as he saw it more clearly. "That long, wavy hair is a silver-blue. Can it be a wig? But it

doesn't seem like one. And that pearly-grey skin!" He noted that, grey though it was, it was a living, healthy luster, and after the first shock it was unutterably lovely—far from the dead-grey one sees in very ill people.

He advanced several steps nearer her, drawn by the glowing welcome in her glorious eyes. When he was close enough, he saw that they were a deep lavender, almost the shade of purple *fleur-de-lis*. Altogether, she was the loveliest woman he had ever seen.

"Hello," Foxe said hoarsely at last. "I hope I'm not intruding. But it seemed as though I was rather expected to come here."

She spoke in reply, and her voice was musical, but her words were meaningless to him. However, her smile was entrancing, and when she beckoned him to come to her, he slipped his guns and packs to the floor. He went up to the couch. She extended her graceful hand to him, grasped his, and drew him down beside her on the couch.

His heart was beating rapidly as her fragrance assailed him. She looked deeply into his eyes, and he felt his senses leaving him—and realized just as he dropped off that he was being very swiftly and thoroughly hypnotized. He was asleep before he could fight back.

When he awakened—he had no conception of how long he had been under—he was amazed to find that he could understand her words, could reply in her own language, although his tongue had some trouble making the strange sounds his mind knew.

When he remarked on this, she smiled warmly.

"Yes, it was for that reason I had to place you in sleep, that I might teach you our language quickly. I apologize and hope you are not angry. May I now explain the things you so want to know about me, about us, and this place?"

She poured two tall goblets full of a sparkling wine, and he sipped appreciatively as he listened to an astounding explanation.

"I am called Yamara, and I am from the planet known to your scientists as Venus," she began. "I and others of us came to your Earth for a very special reason, but to make you understand I will have to go back into our planetary history a bit.

"For some unfortunate biological reason the males of our race have always been very small—dwarfs, you would call them. Their heights ranged from two to two and a half of your feet. The females, on the other hand, have always been from five to five and a half feet tall, during maturity."

Yamara explained that the race

of Venus had a known history of about twenty-five thousand years, and that their science had long ago reached a high point in almost all lines of study.

"One of our biological chemists," she continued, her vivid eyes flashing, "finally discovered a drug that would stimulate the male growth glands, and make our men grow taller. It was greeted with great joy by everyone, and put to use at once—too quickly, as it turned out. It was so generally used that in two generations our men began equaling the women in height.

"This was important to our men," she said earnestly. "They had always had to battle the psychological effects of a great inferiority of spirit, because of their small size, in spite of the fact that the women always loved and respected them.

"But soon an appalling thing became apparent." Foxe felt his blood quicken as he saw tears in her lovely eyes. Obviously, the remembrance brought intense feeling with it. "It was found that the men of the second generation grew tall and strong and mentally splendid until they were about thirty Venerian years old." She paused, then went on. "Then—then they rapidly deteriorated, and before thirty-five were dead! It all happened so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that this second

generation were almost all dead before we could find a counter-agent. At present there are less than a thousand native males alive, and since all have taken the growth drug, we know that in a few years all will be dead."

Foxe took one of the girl's slim hands, which gripped his with surprising strength under her emotion. But she continued bravely, telling how the scientists of Venus had long ago developed rockets for flight, and how some daring adventurers had pierced the planet's eternal cloud-blanket and discovered that which was never visible from the surface—the great universe about them. Huge flying laboratory-observatories had been established in satellite orbits above the clouds, and from these the scientists had learned the secrets of the heavens, including the fact that there were other worlds in the solar system.

"With the dying off of our men, we put our greatest resources of knowledge and man-power into the construction of interplanetary ships, in the hope of finding assistance on other planets."

A crew had made a successful trip to their nearest outer neighbor—the Earth—but had found to their dismay that it was in a very primitive age; that the man-like creatures on Earth were little more than animals.

"Why, we . . . oh, I see," Foxe started and interrupted himself. "I keep forgetting that I'm now back in the Carboniferous age."

"That's right. However, our own history made us feel sure that in time these beast-men would develop into real persons, just as ours had done. And, best of all from our viewpoint, these males were as large or larger than their females, which augured well. Our deepest thinkers felt sure it would be possible to open a Way into the future, and this was done in the Time Gate through which you passed.

"Through this Time Gate from time to time came men of many future ages, whom the Venerian women tried to enlist in their fight for survival. However, they did not want just 'males'. They desired and needed mates who would have the finest and highest qualities possible, qualities which they wanted their race to possess. For that reason a series of test-barriers had been devised, in order that only those with the proper attributes would be chosen."

Foxe shook himself mentally. It sounded like an amazing fantasy, all this she was telling. Yet he felt it was truth. He had fallen more and more under the spell of this bewitchingly lovely Venerian girl. She was, in his eyes, as fine or finer than any Earth girl

he had ever known. Like most men, he set high standards for his female companionship, and he had never yet encountered a woman who promised to possess the unique and extraordinary qualities he sought.

Apparently, from the fact that he was here, listening to her, he had been considered acceptable. But George Roberts—. Why had he been killed?

Yamara read the question from his mind.

"That was entirely an accident, for which I am deeply sorry. The guardian creature, whose simple mind I control, was ordered to test you both, but not to kill. But when your friend stumbled, the beast tried to swerve but also stumbled, and stepped on his head. Yes, your friend would have been most welcome.

"Incidentally, the guardian, Drakoni, was once one of our males, as was Teffani, the great snake you killed. They and other males accompanied our expedition here, and just before their bodies died we transferred their egos, their life-forces and minds, into those bodies, the best we could find, that they might continue to live and serve us. Unfortunately, they are gradually becoming more beast than man, as the instincts of their bodies gain greater control of their mental processes.

"But to conclude. This is our problem, and the way we have tried to solve it. The need is desperate, if our race is to survive. We ask your assistance, personally." The glorious eyes were turned pleadingly upon him, and she leaned toward him, hopefully, imploringly.

Fred Foxe was almost dazed with the idea. He had no strong personal ties to hold him to Earth or to his own time. It would be a tremendous adventure—going to another planet. And as for Yamara, he was already half—. He tried to stop the thought, flushing as he remembered her mind-reading ability.

He rose swiftly and paced the room, thinking furiously, for he was an ambulant thinker. Should he go, or not? In a way it was a cold-blooded proposition; in another a great challenge to his manhood.

"One sure thing," he muttered to himself, "I'll never have another moment's peace of mind if I don't think this out and decide here and now." He looked at her.

"It will take some doing, you know—," he said, "—to agree to give up everything that is real and familiar to me in my own world."

Her gorgeous eyes met his. "I know," she said softly. "Think carefully before you decide. You

are under no compulsion to do this. It must be entirely of your own free will."

He drew a deep breath. "And if I decide—against—?"

"You will be taken back to the Gate and guided through it," she said. "No one will hinder you."

With some effort he tore his eyes away from her. No compulsion! The temptation to say the hell with everything, that all he wanted was to be with her, was almost overwhelming.

He continued pacing and thinking. The adventurous excitement of the thing alone was tempting, too. But there was so much more to be considered. Could he possibly find happiness and contentment on Venus, after the first flush of excitement had worn off? Could he exile himself to a new world, to new conditions? Could he leave everyone and everything he knew and liked here?

For nearly half an hour he prowled forth and back, chain-smoking and studying the problem. He felt sure the girl was not now controlling his mind—that she was wisely leaving it to him to decide for himself.

Yamara answered briefly and concisely the occasional questions he asked, but he noticed that each time he looked at her she was mutely beseeching, imploring. And—was there something else in

those limpid eyes? Did he read there a dawning love for him, personally — or was it wishful thinking on his part? For himself, he knew now, definitely, that he had fallen in love with her. She was the one woman he wanted, the one in all the world who seemed to fulfill the requirements a man sets for himself in choosing the woman who is to be his mate for all time.

Finally he came back and sat down beside her again, his shoulders straight with resolve. He took her slender little hand, and gazed deeply and long into her eyes.

"I . . . I'll accept on one condition, Yamara." He flushed and stammered a bit, but spoke honestly. "I . . . I've fallen in love . . . with you, and if I can be your mate, and yours only, I'll go with you. Is that possible, and are you willing?"

She gave him a rapturous smile and drew him into her lovely arms. "Of course it is possible. As for my willingness, I—oh, my darling! I have been hoping and praying to my gods that you would make that very request!"

Late that night, after Foxe had finally fallen asleep, the beauti-

ful Venerian girl carefully drew herself from his arms, rose and tiptoed from the room. She went down one of the long halls, and into a large, dormitory-like room filled with beds, on each of which reclined another startlingly beautiful young woman. At sight of the newcomer they all rose and pushed eagerly forward to greet her.

She smiled and nodded exultantly, joyfully.

"Ah!" came from the group in a relieved and satisfied sigh.

"Who is next?" she asked them.

One of the girls came forward.

"I am."

"You all saw and heard everything?"

"Yes," they nodded agreement.

"We observed carefully and understand perfectly."

"Good." She turned to the chosen one. "Hurry to the place of sleeping before he awakens. But be very careful never to let him suspect. For he is, as you have all perceived, the finest specimen of his species we have yet caught in the Gate. We must keep him happy and contented here, that he may breed as many of us as possible—before he discovers that all we yamara are identical." . . . * * *



DO YOU BELIEVE IN GHOSTS—SPACE GHOSTS? MAYBE

ASTEROID 745:

by **Martin
Pearson**

IT'S A rather strange thing to be expected to tell a ghost story out here in interplanetary space. The captain has asked me to do this rest period and I'm a man who obeys orders. He says you passengers asked for a ghost story this time and, what's more, you want a ghost story of space.

Now, that's not an easy thing to do. Ghosts and space travel do not quite hit it off with each other. Ghosts belong to the old world, the air-bound, land-bound, sea-bound world, a world where people were dominated by ugly castles and power-mad little men with twisted minds, and where the spirit was warped and bent by the desires of little, land-locked souls. Dirt and lust and night fright: those are the things that called forth ghosts. We haven't had much of that these past seventy years, thank heavens.





NOT—BUT DON'T BE TOO SURE!

MAURITIA

Somehow, out here in the spaces between the stars, between the worlds, there's no room for that sort of horrible thing. There's fright, sure, for there's lots of danger between the stars. There's eeriness, sure, on those strange planets and bits of asteroidal rock. But there are no ghosts of twisted little minds, generally speaking.

Nonetheless, I do know one incident which I consider a true ghost story of space. I can't account for it any other way. The whole thing fits the ghost pattern, though of course we didn't realize it at the time.

It was many years ago, when I was only a junior hand aboard a prospector ship poking around the asteroids. We had been out for a month, had a few more days to go before heading back to base on Juno. We were all a bit rest-

less, because thus far we had had no luck. We'd made landings on three asteroids so far, without being able to get a worthwhile bite out of our Geigers. Chief Braun was in an ugly mood and we were all hoping we'd strike something on this fourth and last landing.

We were angling to make our hook-down on this last rock we had closed in on. Asteroid 745 it was, Mauritia by name, an average size for the type, perhaps twenty miles in diameter. From our radars and scopes it checked up as moderately spherical, primarily rock, no atmosphere, of course—you don't expect any—, probable outcroppings of metal, iron for sure, according to the reflected rays, but otherwise nothing to get excited about.

Braun swore he'd have us all transferred to base jobs if we didn't turn up something this time. He was never a pleasant man to work with, and I almost wished he'd make good his threat. He was excitable, given to sullen periods and violent dislikes. In fact, I think he was a trifle nuts. He was wild about a certain ancestor he claimed to have. A character named Hitler, who lived about two hundred years ago and figured in one of the last two or three world wars.

This Hitler figured as a sort of superman of that benighted cen-

ture. He'd made himself dictator of Germany—at that time the four German states were one country—and set out to conquer the world. Did a lot of damage, too, if I remember my history lessons. He was killed when his capital in Berlin was captured. Or so the books claim, anyway.

Now this Braun claimed to be a direct descendant of his. He had a long story that he claimed he had heard from his father who'd heard it from his mother. This Hitler was supposed to have died childless, but according to Braun he had one child who was given to his wife's family to raise and who took his wife's family name, which was Braun.

Anyway, it all seems downright silly today, but if a man's got a bug on a thing like this, I suppose it helps his ego. Just why he should think it means something to be the descendant of one of those Twentieth Century military nuts I don't know, but then I'm not Braun.

Whatever the case, Braun sure tried to act like his ancestor. He had books about this dictator, he had pictures, he raised a little toothbrush mustache like this character had, and in general he raised hell. He didn't dare try to rake up any of that old conqueror's race nonsense, because that's against the law, and the one thing this Braun bully was afraid

of was getting his record muddied. He'd probably have tried it if he dared.

So Braun lined us up when we'd completed our landing and secured the ship to the rocky plain about us. He read us the riot act, said we had better be sure we returned with some evidence of ore, said he'd keep his radio turned in to our helmet phones and he wanted us to keep ours turned on. We were to report everything to him as we progressed and he wanted to hear our Geigers clicking.

So the four of us prospectors humped out of the port in our suits, with our junk tacked on all around, and sailed our way off in all four directions. In spite of carrying a small mountain of equipment, we still weighed practically nothing and had to be careful how we bounded along. Braun stayed behind, alone. He was going to sit by the transmitter and heckle us. This had happened before, and it undoubtedly gave him a sense of power.

What I liked to do in a case like that was to get completely around the planetoid and turn off my helmet. I could claim that I couldn't receive him through the planetoidal core. He mightn't believe me, but he couldn't prove it, could he?

Anyway, I did get about four miles away, beyond a ridge of

rock, when I got some slight ticks on my counters. You are bound to get something, but unless it comes in strong it's never worth the effort to the Syndicate. Still, it's well to report these things. Besides, when you get a few ticks you may find a strong streak near it.

So I settled down, magnetized my land shoes, and started walking slowly about the vicinity, poking and probing. You can't imagine what it is like unless you have tried it. You may have seen photos and even movies of asteroid prospectors at work, but you have to be there to get the full effect.

You are out of sight of any living or moving thing. You are alone in a completely bleak landscape, all grey and black rock, with infinitely deep crevices, with nasty meteor scars that look like old-time battlefield shellholes. Above, the sky is dead black and filled with cold stars and occasional moving ones, passing asteroids. There is nothing, simply nothing, friendly or calming about the scene. It is a scene of permanent, perpetual death.

In the midst of this, you stalk slowly about, waiting for a series of clicks to sound in your ears. Also hearing Braun yap at you. He's sitting back there in the ship, listening to the sounds of our breaths over his pick-up, hearing

the slight clicks, and talking to us, urging us to greater effort, as if that could possibly do any good.

All this was going on in my ears as I strolled back and forth. I could hear him talking to the three other fellows. Incidentally, none of them had any more luck than I did.

Then I heard Braun swear. "Who's that coming back to the ship without notifying me?" he yells. There's no answer. He calls each of us separately and we all claim we're working. I heard each man reply myself. But Braun is still swearing.

"One of you is lying or else is crazy! I see you coming back very well, you fool! Whoever you are, you have left your equipment! You'll pay for it!"

I was a bit puzzled. I wondered who was coming back to the ship and why. Perhaps one of the other chaps had forgotten something and didn't want to admit it over the phones. Perhaps there was something he wanted to tell Braun in secret. It made me nervous.

Braun's voice sounded again in my earphones. "Who are you? Identify yourself! Any nonsense, and you'll never see space again!"

Still I heard no answer. At this moment my ticking prober sounded a bit quicker. I paid no more attention to Braun's ravings

against the man coming back and bent to my work. My streak seemed to be shaping up now. I worked the prober back and forth, traced the radioactivity to a whitish pocket near a small ridge. The white was frozen gas of some sort.

I unpacked my heater and melted the mass away. Underneath was a metallic outcropping which was surely radioactive. I unpacked my digging equipment and set out to blast off a chunk for further analysis. While I was working I heard Braun still ordering the returning man to identify himself and to explain what he was doing.

I leaned on my tools a moment and listened, for what was going on was quite unusual. Why should a man return—and without his stuff? Did he have an accident?

"Yes, the space lock is open, you dunderhead!" Braun was fuming. "Come in, come in, so I can report you! Did you break your communicator? You'll pay for it!"

In my helmet phone, I heard Braun get up from his seat and start the pump of the space lock. Idly I poked a loose rock with a tool, saw the rock fly off and vanish from the impact of my light stroke against its near-weightlessness.

The pumping sound of the lock

ceased. I heard the inner door click open. Braun's voice roared out, "Who are you? How did you get here? Where is your space suit?"

There was no answer that I could hear. "You don't need a space suit!" shouted Braun, a little high-pitched. "How is that possible? How did you get here?"

Again I heard no sound in reply. But Braun's voice, still higher in pitch, a trifle on the hysterical side, came again. "It's a lie! It's a trick! You can't be standing here! What did you say your name was? You look funny! You dress funny!"

No reply. But this time, after an interval, I heard Braun, apparently in a corner of the room, shouting hysterically, "Your name is Mauritz, Leopold Mauritz. Yes, yes. But what do you want of me? And why is your head so lopsided? What has happened to your skull?"

I heard a sound of rushing about, as if Braun was trying to hit something or somebody. Then there was a hissing sound as of air escaping, then silence.

I tripped my helmet phone on, called in. There was no answer. The line was dead.

Staking out my find, I hastily loaded my equipment and started back.

When I came within sight of the ship, the other three men

were also arriving. We stood side by side before the lock and conversed by means of direct contact.

What we saw was this: The space lock was open, the air had escaped, and Braun was lying half in and half out, dead from strangulation. That was all. How the lock had gotten open I can't say, except that Braun in his frenzy must have operated the hand switch from the inside without checking the outside controls. I find it hard to believe that Braun would do that, for he was much too experienced a hand.

But then if Braun had not done it, who had? There was no one else around. We four were the sum total of living things on the planetoid Mauritia. I checked with the others. They had all heard Braun's strange conversation. None of them had heard any answers.

It is down in the records that Braun died of a mental fit. We all four testified to what we had heard and the infallible lie-detectors bore us out completely. None of us had returned to Braun. But Braun was dead, cold and blue and frenzied of face.

That's the extent of my ghost story. I didn't see any ghost. I didn't hear any ghost. But it is

my opinion that Braun saw and heard one.

Why a ghost there, and why did it pick on Braun? Now that's a question folks always ask me when I tell this yarn. I gave it a lot of thought, and once when I had a leave on Earth I did some research.

I found that this planetoid, number seven-four-five, was first discovered about 1928 by an amateur astronomer named Leopold Mauritz. He named it after himself, Mauritia. Now this man Mauritz was a fairly successful businessman in his home town, which was Berlin in Germany. But he also happened to be of the Jewish religion, which was one of the things this German superman-character, Hitler, hated.

I couldn't find very much on Mauritz, except one final item. He jumped out of a window and killed himself in 1934. He was driven to suicide by the persecution and the lunatic laws set up by this Hitler.

I also think that Braun's story of being a direct descendant of that old dictator must be correct. A ghost—if it was a ghost—couldn't make a mistake, could he? Not on the ghost's own personal world, anyway. * * *

by Basil Wells

The Starship was in trouble.

She was the first ship to span the void between solar systems. The voyage had lasted for hundreds of years, and the crew, and their grandparents, and their grandparents, had never set foot on a planet's soil.

But the years had taken their toll. The shielding of the hull was imperfect. The jets cracked and their liners could not be replaced. The air conditioning broke down constantly and there was a constant seepage of precious oxygen into outer space.

For every normal birth among the thousand crew members there were five or six mutant young. The cosmic rays, filtering through the imperfect shielding, were playing havoc. And the cereals and root crops, too, in the agricultural levels, were changing. Edible food was less plentiful. Sickness and vitamin deficiencies were wreaking havoc, as well.

Into the thin atmosphere of Ghakk, second of the three planets circling Rhebus IX, they drove the ship, braking as they swung in a tightening orbit about that desert world.

The jets crumbled swiftly and there was a flareback to the belly fuel tanks. The Starship plunged, in a long curving dive, down to-



MONSTER NO MORE



A LOST HANDFUL OF HUMANS IN THE
VASTNESS OF SPACE, THEIR FATE WAS
A NIGHTMARE OF GENETICS GONE WILD!



ward the ragged canyons and gray-dusted barrens of Ghakk.

The two escape craft still in commission quitted the stricken ship and dropped planetward on cushioning gouts of flame. And after them space-suited crewmen sprang into space and shook out their nested parachute vanes.

Only the commander and two of his faithful officers remained aboard to attempt a hopeless grounding on Ghakk.

The curving globe slid away beneath them, hiding the ship forever from the escaping crew members. And the arid deserts and wind-eroded hills came up to meet the dying ship's frosted plates.

Almost they completed the circuit of Ghakk.

A hundred miles west of the canyons where most of the crew had landed the great ship plowed into the desert, jounced high into the air, and struck again. The three officers died with the first impact.

For eighty miles the mile-long cylinder, battered and gaping at a thousand rents, skittered along—to come to rest at last in the shadowy depths of a sunken lake.

So the years passed on Ghakk, and the mutant crew members banded together, like to like, in widely separate valleys. After a time the mutants bred true—true to their own warped species—

and memories of the distant system they had never seen were forgotten, quasi-religious fantasies.

And, with the centuries, the broad lake where the Starship lay submerged grew shallow and choked with the fine gray dust of Ghakk. In time, like a stranded whale she lay exposed.

THE LONG-LEGGED monster turned his back on the familiar green canyon depths, far below now in the great valley's shadows. He knew that he had seen for the last time the canyon of his people, and the barren little side-canyon where his parents, who had loved him in spite of his outlandish legs, had kept him hidden until he was grown.

He hoped they would not be punished too severely for their refusal to destroy him at birth. One of the Cru having discovered his refuge while hunting *pelfs*, warriors of the Cru would by now be hot on his trail.

"Let no monster live in the Valley of Cru." That was the grim law of the legless "men" of the canyon. And already a miniature blot of moving dust lay far below in the depths.

For an hour or more he trotted steadily westward through the broken splinters of dead rocky ridges and across narrow arid flats of fine-ground grayish dust.

He twisted and weaved in and out, the better to confuse his trail, and where he could his rough leather sandals traversed trackless bare rock.

He passed greasy-leaved clumps of bluish growth. Pale yellowish cacti thrust grotesquely from the sun-seared soil. And the dust-smothered, toppled wall of some long-forgotten Ghakkan building reared unexpectedly in his path at intervals.

Now the native lizard race of Ghakk which had built these buildings was grown weak and degenerate, and the Cru had taken over their choicest canyon. Or so the boasting tales of the Cru ancients would have it. The lizard people's cities and roads were swallowed by the encroaching desert, and their ancient culture was passing with the dwindling water supply . . .

Something moved in a waist-high thicket close by. He drew his only hand weapon, a long, chip-sharpened dagger of red igneous stone, and he freed the stout, short bow across his shoulder the more easily to reach it.

The clump of brush was less than five feet in width. He stooped, scooped up a handful of the gritty dust, and flung it into the growth.

The flesh of a hairy pelf would be good . . . if this was a pelf. Alert and ready, he sheathed his

knife even as his bowstring snapped into its nock.

A coughing, choking sound came from the little copse—a strangled, despairingly human cry—and then a bronze-skinned, four-limbed creature burst out opposite him.

Two great leaps and he had it.

He felt soft flesh, and the beast resisted fiercely. He released it quickly after a moment. For he saw that he had captured a female, clad as was he in a brief g-string of furry pelfhide, a short vest of the same material, and coarse, cracked sandals.

But—and his stomach rebelled with the horror of it—she too was a monster, like himself!

Instead of the two huge, muscular arms with which true Crus walked, ran, and worked, she had ungainly, tapering, long legs. And her arms, like his, were short and almost dainty, so soft was their appearance.

Like the lower animals of Ghakk, she used four limbs rather than two. She was atavistic—a throwback to the days when the Cru's ancestors were little better than beasts.

And yet it was comforting to know that another shared his own terrible deformity. Perhaps they could become friends and his ever-present sense of loneliness and self-loathing could be forgotten.

"Who are you, female-who-hides?"

The woman—and now he could see that her dark, dust-caked hair had hidden a dusky, even-featured face; a rather attractive face for a monster to possess—had stopped sneezing. Her teeth shone.

"I am Vanna. I come from the Valley of Jaff."

"Jaff?" He scratched thoughtfully at his gray-caked chest. "Never heard of it. Did they drive you out from among the Cru who dwell there?" He tugged at a lock of sandy hair.

"In a way." She laughed, and he liked the sound. He had never heard his mother laugh—but she had cried often enough, at the sight of him. "A Cruman and his three wives drove me out."

"How do you mean, er—Vanna?" He paused awkwardly. "By the way, I am Malan."

She bobbed her head pertly. "Well, you see, Malan, Jaff, who rules the Valley of Jaff, wanted me for his sixth mate."

"A Cruman wanted you—an ugly monster—for his mate?" Malan laughed scornfully. "It is a story you make up."

"I like that! I'm no more monster than are you."

"What I said. A monster like you and me. We should both have been destroyed."

The girl tapped her forehead.

"Aren't you slightly off up here?" she asked, smiling. "But then, who isn't? I suppose I do look like a harpy."

"Are you being pursued, Vanna?"

"I expect so. Jaff and three of his five wives were hot on the trail last evening. But I traveled at night to throw them off."

"Through the cold?" The thought made Malan shiver. He had a single ragged blanket of pelf strapped on his back under which he would huddle in some warm cave nest.

Vanna tugged out two pelfskin robes that she had been sleeping on inside the little thicket's shelter, and showed them to Malan. She had laced them together to form a sort of furry nightshirt that reached to her sandals.

"It *was* cold," she admitted. "But better freeze than be beaten and abused by Jaff."

Malan twitched an eyebrow. The customs of the Crumen in her native canyon and his own obviously must differ widely. In the Valley of Cru even the mightiest warrior possessed but one mate. Nor would they consider allowing a monster in the valley, even as a slave.

He shrugged and hoisted the female monster's blanket to his shoulder. He could not stand here wondering and talking.

"Come," he said, turning and starting off. "We must not be captured."

Vanna stared after him, with anger, her slender little fingers caressing the dark wooden handle of the knife thrust through her g-string. She stood glowering, while he put a dozen paces between them.

"Why, that rock-headed brute!" she muttered to herself. "Never even asked me if I wanted to go that way!" She took a hesitant step.

Malan stopped, grinned back at her and waited.

"Your voice carries well," he said. "I think you're not really angry, are you?"

Vanna flashed a reluctant smile and shook her head . . .

The last crimson streamers of Ghakk's ancient sun revealed the pursuing knot of warriors from the Valley of Cru.

The two fugitives were quitting a desolate dust flat, hill-rimmed and wide, and turned to look back. They saw ten of the Crumen come bounding, on tireless long arms, across the flattened gray expanse but a mile behind them.

Short they were, less than four feet in height, but broad of shoulder and long of arm. They were legless—only vestigial pads of feet with tiny nailless digits supported

their humanoid trunks—but their upper limbs carried them along at a fast pace.

They carried throwing spears, bows, and short, metal-bladed swords. And most of them bore small packs in addition to the pouched harness about their bodies.

"We'll lose them among these rocks ahead," Malan promised doubtfully.

"What horrible-looking things they are, Malan."

Malan was thunderstruck. Had she never seen Crumen? He stared at her. "But they are Crumen," he said. "The Cru. We, you and I—are monsters."

"You poor gulpin," Vanna said. "Is that what they tried to tell you? In our valley we know the truth. True Cru have legs."

Malan made an expressive sound of disgust.

"Your people are mad," he said shortly. "Come, let us turn to the north and escape them."

They climbed for a time, the wind-rasped rock of the slope like coarse sandpaper under their clumsy sandals. They came to a ridge that angled northward, affording an easy path for a time.

The four tiny moonlets, racing close down to Ghakk's surface, were hidden as the last light from the sun died, but a few moments later the first pale satellite pushed above the eastern horizon. Now

they could see where their stumbling feet were placed.

A second, and a third moonlet appeared. Light flooded the time-worn hills and ragged canyons and crevices. They quit the ridge and crossed a wind-swept apron of creviced rock to a second ridge. But they did not follow the easy way along the crest. The pursuing Crumen could not have failed to see a moving dot, or two dots, silhouetted by the moonlight upon the skyline. Malan knew better than that.

Vanna fell behind, limping. After a time she stumbled and fell. Malan came back and helped her up. He, too, was sagging with exhaustion.

"A little farther, Vanna," he whispered. "The canyon just below us is choked with huge boulders and fallen rimrock. Plenty of good hiding places—maybe caves."

"I'll make it, Malan."

Malan put his arm around her waist. The naked flesh was satiny and warm beneath his touch, and for the first time he felt a strange yearning emotion. He knew that she needed his help—that she accepted him as an equal—and he was content to serve her.

The pale moons sent blurred moving shadows racing before and beside them. They avoided sand and dusty patches of rock, trying to leave no spoor, as they

struggled deeper into the rocky jumble.

It was bitterly cold, with their breath blossoming whitely in the thin air, when they found a rock-hidden tiny cave. There was sand on the floor, and into this they burrowed wearily.

Malan heaped the three robes over them and the female monster fell asleep with her head pillowed on his shoulder. A moment later and he, too, was dreaming.

Something was wrong. Malan was sure of it. He felt the coarse fluidity of the sand and the warmth of flesh other than his own. And his memory was dulled . . . What had happened?

His eyes opened.

He was looking up into the face of a female—a long-legged, monstrous female. And her face was familiar. It seemed—then he remembered. Vanna!

Yet at the same time he could feel a warm, unconscious body at his side, the gentle pressure of its breathing on his flesh even and slow.

"You aren't Vanna!" And he groped for his knife.

The girl-shape wavered and became something else. A Crumen! No! A monster, for his legs were long and muscular. And his hair was sandy and hacked-off roughly about his ears. He looked like—he was—another Malan!

Malan knew a sudden paralyzing fear.

"A Shape!" he gasped.

Vanna stirred. Awoke.

The monstrous, changeable entity standing before them in the cave grinned in a friendly fashion. His weirdly familiar face shifted like a reflection in a disturbed pool and then steadied. Malan shuddered. Now the Shape would pounce . . .

He fought at the confining robes and at the hampering clasp of the terrified girl's hands. He felt the pelf-hide rending.

"Yes," agreed the grinning duplicate Malan, "I am, a Shape. I am Rhee, fugitive from my own kind. And I would be friends."

Malan came surging up to his feet and grappled the creature. Rhee was unarmed and naked. But the body Malan seized was, at once, yielding and powerful. His arms were swallowed up, engulfed by the protoplasmic monster. He was helpless.

Vanna came at the Shape with her stone silver of a knife bared. And all at once a whip of ropy flesh darted from the strange being's chest, to strip away the blade in her hand. She staggered backward and to her knees.

"Sorry to get rough with you two," Rhee said calmly. "But even a Shape takes little pleasure in having his flesh haggled by edged weapons."

"Eat us and be done!" flared Vanna, tears making her eyes bright. "We do not fear you!"

"I am not hungry, you silly mutant," the Shape said, chuckling happily. "I eat only vegetables, fruits, and fish. Are you any one of them?"

"Perhaps we were hasty," admitted Malan. "You could have eaten us both by now. But, among the Cru, it is said that the terrible Shapes eat one another."

Rhee released Malan. And behind the Shape the sun rode high in the heavens. Rhee squatted in the warm sunshine just inside the cave's entrance. He examined his right hand curiously. A second thumb grew as he stared.

"Oh, most of us are cannibalistic," he admitted with a smirk. "Many of my people have devoured as many as twenty of their own kin, or their own offspring. The food supply is rather uncertain in our valley, you see."

"But it happens that I am allergic to animal flesh. Huge purplish pustules break out over my entire body if I indulge, unfortunately. And, being a variant from the other Crumen, or Shapes, I was naturally forced to leave the valley and hide in these hills."

"Now," sighed Vanna, relief in her voice, "I can sleep nights. Providing, of course, that you join us."

"Never fear." Rhee grinned horribly again and changed into a pouchy-breasted old hag with stringly white hair. "I'll guard you from this forward young monster, dearie."

"Don't dearie me!" Vanna cried, her face flaming. "I'm not afraid of Malan. I just didn't want you nibbling off a leg or arm."

"My error, lovely mutant," said Rhee gallantly, bowing and switching abruptly again to his masculine form.

In his haste he forgot the scraggly white hair of the old female. It dangled like a hood of serpents down upon his brawny shoulders.

"Look, Rhee," said Malan uncertainly. "As long as a female is with us, and—well—Hadn't you better hunt up a g-string or something?"

"Great jets, yes!" A gaudy reddish sash materialized, vanished, and was replaced by a hairy g-string. "I'd forgotten the silly regard you mutant monsters have for clothing."

"I suppose you Shapes never bother with garments?"

Rhee shook his head jerkily. "Nuh uh. We Crumen need no such coverings. Our outer flesh adapts to any temperature. Of course, you mutants find that impossible."

Vanna laughed scornfully. "You call yourself a Cru. And Malan calls the ugly legless ones

Crumen, too. But my people, with our long legs and unchanging form, we are the *real* Crumen."

"What's the straight of it, Shape?" asked Malan, sorely puzzled. "Surely you must admit that we are all three monsters!"

Rhee scratched at his pale Medusa's locks with a thoughtful set of fingernails. The hair shortened and grew sandy again.

"The female is wrong—but so are you. Only a true Cruman could adapt himself to any form or environment, as we Shapes do."

A shadow, falling across Rhee's body, cut off Malan's possible reply. It was a short, compact shadow—legless!

"The Cru," rasped Malan, reaching for his bow.

Rhee fell in upon himself. He became a shapeless blob of writhing flesh and protoplasmic jelly. He flung out a thin whip of colorless, muscular flesh, and the legless one came thudding into their midst.

Malan quieted him with a fragment of rock. The warrior went limp. Malan stripped off his weapons and flung himself out of the cave.

A second legless one bounded toward them, on massive arms. His mouth opened to voice a triumphant cry. And then Rhee's whip of protoplasmic leathery

flesh cut him down. Swift as Malan was, Rhee had preceded him out of the cave.

"Drag it out of sight," said Rhee momentarily humanoid from the chest up, "and we'll polish off the rest of them quickly."

Malan dropped another rock against the bald brown skull and tugged the creature behind a huge boulder. There, with strips from the Cruman's blanket, he bound the mighty arms together.

"Rhee," he said huskily, "you're an all-right Shape." Swiftly he sprang back to the cave opening and ranged himself alongside his ally.

Malan, Vanna and Rhee were staggering under burdens of swords, water bladders and extra blankets as they climbed a ridge half an hour later. Behind them six weaponless, bound warriors chafed their bonds furiously against sharp rock edges. The Shape had roped them all very neatly.

"Without water," Rhee said, "they can follow no further."

"You know this country, Rhee," Malan said. "Where can we find a deserted and fertile canyon?"

The Shape laughed.

"Nowhere." He took up a fragment of chalky gray stone and knelt before a smooth, darker slab. "See, here is the Valley of Lizard Ones—the true Ghakkans,

degenerate though they be. Directly north and west.

"West again from that is the double, U-shaped Valley of Shapes. And south of the Lizard Ones is the Valley of Giants—also mutant descendants of our race."

"No other valleys or little canyons that are habitable?"

"Two or three." Rhee nodded. "But monsters too horrible for the Cru or the other mutants to accept exist in them somehow. Hairy things, four, five—even eight-legged. Crawling blind things, yellow and slimy . . ."

"What would you suggest then, Rhee?"

"I say let us cross the great fissure that bars this cut-up section from the land west of us. We don't know what lies beyond—desert or more badlands or fertile plains, or what kind of creatures—but it's worth a try."

Vanna nodded. "Sounds good to me. But how do we cross? Can you sprout wings and ferry us over?"

The Shape was amused. "I can glide for a short distance," he said, "but not carrying a load. However, there is one spot, south of the Valley of Shapes, where the great rift narrows to perhaps a hundred feet. There three huge trees grow close together on the chasm brink."

"A bridge, eh?" Malan studied the map thoughtfully. "But here,

so close to your people's valley, will we not be discovered?"

"It is a chance we must take, Malan. In the late afternoon we can risk it. Only in the morning do the Shapes hunt outside the barrier cliffs."

"I'm for it, Malan," Vanna cried out. "Once beyond the fissure, Jaff and his wives cannot follow us."

"I agree also, Rhee."

"Good," the Shape said, absent-mindedly blossoming a cuplike bright blue ear from his chin momentarily, before he rose to lead the way.

So it was that they headed northward for a time, almost to the Valley of Lizard Ones. Toward evening they surprised a hunting party of six grotesque, brownish-scaled, dwarfish saurians, but the sight of them sent the upright little lizard men scampering.

And with night they found a low-roofed cave, with a narrow entrance, within which they built a fire.

"The Hairy Beasts," Rhee told them gravely, "may see the fire and come to attack us. However, as long as the fire burns the light will blind their weak pink eyes and restrain them."

"Why worry, then?" yawned Malan, and was asleep.

A second later, or so it seemed, he was dreaming that a Hairy

Beast sat astraddle his chest. He felt the coarse hair rasping his naked flesh, and the stench of bestial breath was foul and hot in his face.

The dream was very real. He had experienced these nightmares before. He groaned disgustedly and attempted to roll over.

Abruptly he was fully awake. The weight was still there, and thick legs wedged his blanket-swathed arms to his sides. His eyes popped wide . . .

In the dying flare of the ashes he saw the gleaming, dagger-like teeth of the Hairy Beast close above his unshielded throat. They dropped nearer.

And Malan exploded into action, rolling out from under the apish brute, his arms rending the peltskin blanket.

A second blanket splashed down over his head and body. He tore it away, stumbling over Vanna's sleeping body as he did so, and sprawling, headlong, into the embers of the fire.

He sprang upright again, cursing, and his eyes searched the shadowed cave for the misshapen brute.

The Hairy Beast had vanished. Rhee lay curled in his warm hides, his even breathing loud and undisturbed, and Vanna was sitting up, trembling. Perhaps he had injured her as well as fright-

ened her! Her body was quivering in strange little spasms.

"Vanna," he said anxiously, sitting down beside her, while his eyes ranged the cave and its entrance. "I didn't hurt you?"

He pulled her extra blanket up around her shoulders and put his arm around her to reassure her. But the ugly, broken paroxysms continued—even more violently than before.

"Now, Vanna," he soothed. "Now, now!"

And then, as his mother had infrequently done—when she could conquer her natural revulsion at touching her monstrous son—he tipped up her face and gently kissed her. She quieted. He kissed her again.

It was pleasant. He had forgotten what loneliness was like; he had forgotten that they were both monsters fit only for destruction. He held her close to him for a long moment.

Vanna pushed him away. Her shoulders started jerking again, and now he saw that she was laughing. And that she had been laughing all the time . . .

"You looked so funny, Malan," she almost sobbed in hilarious agony, "when Rhee pretended he was a Hairy Beast!"

Malan gave her a disgusted shove. He started for Rhee's nest of blankets. But the Shape was gone.

Growling under his breath at the two jokesters, he settled again into his blankets. Swiftly his chilled body warmed, and he grew sleepy again. His last thought was how well Vanna's lithe body had fitted into his arms.

Vanna knelt beside him, her soft fingers caressing his eyelids. The morning sunlight shadowed her dark eyes and face as they shielded him from its flaming glow.

"I am ashamed of myself," she said tenderly, "that I angered you by laughing. Forgive me."

She bent lower. He flung aside the blankets and pulled her yet closer. Her lips parted . . .

"What's—what's all this?" a familiar voice cried out angrily from nearby.

It was Vanna. Malan sat up. And the Vanna that had melted so pleasantly into his arms, shifted, writhed, and became a laughing, toothless old crone with a twisted, warty chin.

Malan swung a knotted fist at the drawn lips and jutting chin, and felt a satisfying jolt travel up along his arm.

"A joke is a joke," said Vanna severely to the sprawled, but still cackling, Shape, "but there's a limit. From now on you better stay a Cruman—and with dark hair, too."

Rhee's masculine form returned, a glorious, muscle-rippling, deep-chested, godlike shape that made Malan feel like a boy. And the Shape's hair was a thick, tangled mop of black. He stood up.

"I'll try," he agreed, his strange new eyes shining like polished brass, "but I make no promises."

And for the next three days, while they traversed the desolate reaches of desert and empty, rock-strewn canyons, Rhee kept his word. Only once did he forget himself, and extend a fragile pseudopod to whisk an arrow from Malan's startled grasp.

As a consequence Malan was too late to down a shambling, bearlike pelf. And the slate-hued beast waddled hurriedly away among a cluster of eroded greenish boulders.

That was early in the third day, as they passed near the Valley of Giants, and well it was that they did not slay the pelf. For close on the heels of the clumsy brute came a score of the naked, hairy-headed giants.

Malan lay close beside Vanna in the shallow cup of sand-floored granite, with Rhee on her other side, and peered cautiously over the rim. A dead stub of cactus hampered full vision, but it also shielded his head from view.

Twice as tall as Malan were the pallid, elephantine monsters.

Their heads were huge hairy masses of varied hues, from which only their tiny eyes and flabby red mouths and teeth gleamed. Many of them possessed extra rudimentary limbs, sprouting at random over their unlovely torsos, and two giants bore two fully-developed heads apiece.

All of them carried knotted clubs in their misshapen fists.

"That was close," Malan muttered, after a long wait. "Did you see them or hear them coming, Rhee?"

"I should brag and say yes, Malan. The truth is, I was just being playful when I snatched that arrow from you."

"That evens you up for the other morning," said Vanna, still resentful.

"Malan hasn't dared to try kissing you since, eh?" Rhee chortled. "Anyhow, we'd have lost an hour dressing the pelf. And we might have reached the fissure too late."

"We must cross tonight?"

"Rather. The Valley of Shapes is too close at the point to take any chances. We might hide out until the following evening, but my people are skilled at scenting out any sort of edible flesh. Against more than one Shape we would be helpless."

"What's holding us back, then?" demanded Vanna, standing up and thinking her sandals

into both their ribs. "Come on, you lazy ones!"

Three gigantic trees, white-boled and straight, with the rot of age hollowing-out living caverns at their roots. Three forest giants, balanced on the sheer rift's brink, and lifting two hundred feet into the thin air of dying Ghakk . . .

Smoke, thin and pale, lifted from fires kindled on the chasm's side against their massive boles. In theory, the side first burned through would be the direction of fall. In practice — anything could happen.

They had decided to fell the three trees together, thus preventing any possible emulation of their bridging feat by others.

Vanna and Malan peered down into the great crack while the flames licked hotly upward behind them. A thousand feet—two thousand feet—perhaps much further, the emptiness fell away below. Darkness shrouded the murky depths, but a rock fragment, after a long interval, sent back the faintest echo of a splash.

All the face of Ghakk was split and riven in this fashion. Ghakk was a chilling, ancient planet circling a dark-shadowed luminary, and in her dying convulsions her outer husk was shattered.

Rhee joined them. "The trees' interiors are aflame now," he

warned. "Once they topple we must hurry across."

Malan turned to watch the flames. He frowned doubtfully up at the growing column of heated air and smoke. Fortunately a stiff north breeze, from off the higher desert tableland they had quitted, caught it and ripped it apart. And the dust in the moving air merged with the smoke into a drifting haze.

"If we slip off the log," Rhee warned, "the ugly water-lovers, who dwell in the depths, will feast well. It is they who bar any descent into the sunken voids as a way of escape from this island of canyons."

"Are they, too, mutants?" Vanna wanted to know.

"No. When we Cru first came to Ghakk they were there. And long after we are gone the slimy amphibians will live on in their watery gulfs."

The fires crackled loudly. And the sun was nearing the western rim of the encircling uplands. In a few moments the sky would flame briefly with dusty sunset, and then darkness would come.

With a sudden loud cracking and popping of fibers the largest of the three trees started toppling — squarely out over the void!

"Perfect!" cried Malan.

The vast trunk smashed down, its bushy upper branches crashing and splintering on the oppo-

site lip of the crevice. And then, with the slow, inexorable movement of heavy hinges, it buckled in the middle, and slid smoothly into the depths . . .

Rhee grunted disgustedly, and his erect body slumped into something shapeless for one brief moment. Then he stood erect.

"Two to go," he said.

A moment. Two moments. And then the ominous crackling of the flames was drowned by the snapping explosions of wrenched and tortured wood. And now the two remaining trees leaned outward, together, and thundered down.

Hastily, the three moved well away from the vast cleft.

The upper limbs of the two trees meshed together and battled. The right hand tree revolved its fire-blackened bole and bounced toward the watchers. They dropped to the ground, cowering, and the ugly cylinder brushed across their prone bodies and was gone.

They saw the awesome bulk of it upending until it was vertical, as the crown plunged downward into the abyss. There was a rumble of sound and then nothing more.

The third tree remained, smoke curling from its rotten dry heart. And it seemed to be anchored securely in place.

"Still game, Vanna?" Malan's hand was on the girl's shoulder.

Vanna clung to his arm, put up her face to clear away the dark hair, and nodded. In the ebbing crimson twilight that had fallen he saw that her lips were thin over locked teeth.

"Take her over, Malan," came Rhee's urgent voice. "Those crashes may bring Shapes—or the tree may burn through."

Malan wanted to protest. He should cross first to see if all was safe. And then Vanna could follow. But there was an undertone of recognized danger that Rhee's voice revealed.

He helped Vanna up across the hot char to the white trunk. The bark was firm and free of scaly patches, but it was hot under their worn sandals. They hurried ahead, out over the emptiness. And now Malan was thankful for the growing dusk.

It was like running along a narrow, high-crowned road built above the level of a marsh or lake.

They reached the limbs, wriggled through and around them, and came at last to the solid rock beyond.

And when he had taken Vanna a safe distance from the mangled debris of the crushed limbs, Malan turned to go back to join Rhee. Only to see the Shape's indistinct body come springing lightly from the tree top.

"The base of the tree was almost burned through," he told

Malan. "That is why I did not come with you. My added weight might have finished it off."

They backed away from the entangling branches. It was almost completely dark by now, although two of the wan little moons of Ghakk were lifting above the distant hilltops. They could see the red glow of the tree's blazing base.

The tree settled and crunched as though it was preparing for its fatal flight downward. Vanna cried out, pointing.

Four figures, monsters by the shape of them, were running toward them across the trembling bridge. The moons were waxing. Malan could see that one figure was that of a giant male and the others were females. And even as he watched the great bole shifted, sending a screaming figure gyrating madly into the depths below.

"Jaff and his mates!" cried Vanna, throwing herself into Malan's arms. She was sobbing.

Malan tore away her clinging fingers and pushed her away, even while he unslung his bow and swung his quiver to a readier angle.

"Go back, Jaff!" he roared. "Vanna is my mate!"

A bull bellow of amused sound answered. The warrior waved muscular, hairy arms as he halted for a second.

"Not for long is she yours, dogson," he jeered. "After I have crunched your skull and eaten of your heart she will be mine."

"Keep him talking," muttered Rhee. "The weakened trunk must break soon."

"Back!" cried Malan. "Go back. The tree is ready to crash!"

"Fool!" said Rhee. "Now he will try to rush us."

The warrior laughed derisively and came racing forward. Malan bent his bow and sent an arrow speeding toward that vague moving bulk. Another arrow—a third, and a fourth—and Jaff shrieked and went toppling through the branches he had but reached.

One of the females turned and went scampering back the way she had come, but the other came swiftly running toward them.

"Vanna!" she called out. "It is Nian!"

"She is not unfriendly," Vanna said. "Of all Jaff's mates she is the kindest—and the youngest."

Malan lowered his bow. He was wondering, thankful that the decision was not necessary, whether he could have killed the female monster. In his brain now was a sense of the difference between Crumen and their mates, a sense that was new to him. The females were to be protected—as he would always protect Vanna...

Branches rasped across the

bare rock. The ripping bark and leaves voiced a protesting groan, as the forest giant took its last plunge; and the female came catapulting out of the sky to the rocky ground before them.

The Shape dragged her limp body back from the brink of the chasm to safety.

It was noon, and the four who had crossed the crevice were entering the narrow entrance to a sparsely wooded valley. There was game here, and an hour before they had discovered a spring bubbling up through crystalline white sand.

All of them could live here, Malan was thinking. Here there need be no distinctions of monster or Cruman. His faith in the true Cru being the legless warriors from his home valley was badly shaken. Rhee, with his flexible adaptation to any shape and his ready wits, was certainly much superior to the legless ones.

And so, reluctantly, he was coming to regard the Shape as a Cruman, even as Rhee had claimed, while Vanna and Nian and he were obviously mutants. Vanna's claim that her tribe were true Cru was patently false—Nian was proof of that.

Nian moved gracefully, almost bonelessly, in front of them. Her long, fleshless limbs were double-jointed and flexible. A second pair of tiny pale blue eyes were

set close to her narrow blade of a nose, below her wide great eyes of deepest violet. She was long-faced, with tiny white teeth, and the orange-red of her hair sprouted in weird tufts.

There was the unhuman beauty of a wild creature about her . . .

They rounded a sweeping wall of reddish shale and rotten yellow rock, and looked across a dry-crusting swale to where a shallow, mile-wide lake opened. From the calm, dark waters a weird rounded mass loomed.

"The spassip!" Malan cried out.

He was dazed. The legend of the spassip that had brought the Cru to Ghakk, a legend he had scarcely believed, was suddenly to become reality. The vastness of the mile-long ship awed him. It was like a hill spanning the lake.

Just before them, a ready finger of mud extended outward toward the crumpled nose of the spassip. Already the Shape and the monster female, Nian, were racing fleetly across it.

Vanna and Malan followed.

Rhee was climbing through one of the rust-stained gaps in the ship's upper hull. He paused long enough to lend Nian a ropy tentacle, and pulled her up after him. Then they both vanished into the interior.

A moment later Malan was assisting Vanna through the same opening into a twisted, dust-

floored corridor with walls of distorted metal. The broken webs of fist-sized *chedda* spiders marked the passage of Rhee and Nian. They followed.

On either hand strange metal caves, dusty and choked with debris, opened. They saw strange furnishings of metal and sleek horn-like material.

They came at last to the dusty, dimly-lighted control room, where the three brave Cru of that age-old legend had died, and they reverently examined the corroded control panels and ruined equipment.

Rhee turned from a metallic drawer, a rounded metal plate in his hand, and stalked woodenly over to Malan. Wordlessly, he passed the little medallion to the monster.

Malan studied the raised figures and the odd lettering.

"Monsters," he said, wonderingly, "like Vanna and me."

Rhee shook his head, his features fluid and smoothly empty. And there was a listlessness in the motion that chilled Malan. The truth came flooding into his brain.

He saw the sprawled, dust-coated space suit in which a Cruman had died, and it had long

separate legs. Another plaque of dull metal on the wall showed two long-legged creatures standing with clasped hands. In the background loomed a spassip, on which strange symbols were inscribed.

"The Second Ark." Malan examined the cryptic, meaningless letters. But he knew the truth now. He knew at last that it was he, he who was a true Cruman, as was Vanna. They two alone were true descendants of the fabulous, brave people who had traveled from some distant planet to Ghakk in this ship. The Shape, the Giants, and the Legless Ones—all of them were mutants.

So now was Rhee to be considered a "monster"? A true comrade, with a wisdom beyond his own, who had treated him as an equal even though he had then been classed a mutant . . . ?

He flung an arm around the Shape's shoulder.


"All the monsters," he said, "we left across the rift."

And Vanna was smiling agreement. This time it would be different. Mutant and Cru would work shoulder to shoulder to build a life for themselves, to fashion a world where they might be happy and safe . . . * * *

by David Grinnell

GANYMEDE HOUSE

IT'S WONDERFUL WHAT
YOU CAN FIND AROUND
TOWN, IF YOU LOOK



NEW YORK is just like a regular perpetual World's Fair, isn't it? Just full of all sorts of interesting doings, free exhibits, odd characters. I suppose I'm not the first one to go on like this about New York; I guess out-of-towners must be pretty fed up with this stuff, but I don't care. I'm a native New Yorker—well, Brooklyn, anyway—and I say that it's a continual carnival.

For instance, it's full of what a fair grounds would call "foreign pavilions." That's a fancy term which means a sort of store-mu-

GANYMEDE HOUSE

seum where they display stuff made in different countries. New York is full of them. For instance, in Rockefeller Center, Radio City, that is, there's several. There's Sweden House, for one, where they have a very interesting display full of glass and silverware and such. It don't cost nothing to go in. It's a store, sure, run by the Swedes, I suppose, but it don't cost nothing to look, you see. At that, I bought a glass letter-opener for seventy-five cents as a sort of souvenir, last time I was there.

Then there's a French House and an Italian House and a lot of others, up and down the streets near Radio City, and they're all very swell-looking places and make you feel rich just to look at them. There's even a very swank-looking Finland House, with its windows full of whatever they make in those Eskimo-type countries. In fact, there's an America House, too, though that never quite made sense to me. What's the point, here in America? But what I'm getting at is that I like to look into those places, and the clerks always act like they were glad to show everything and don't care if they never sell anything.

Well, what I'm getting at—, Oh, I don't know how to explain it. Maybe I'd better just tell you the story.

One day I had to call on a

customer whose office was in the Fifties, and I was walking down one of the side streets looking at the swank stores, with a half hour on my hands before my appointment. Then I saw a new one. A tasteful glass and chrome front, a lot of the bleached, polished wood fixtures like they all go in for, and so on, but it was a place I'd never spotted before. The sign on the window says "Ganymede House." Ah, I thought, another county heard from.

A glance at my watch showed me that I still had time, so I looked into the window. It had the usual sort of stuff these Houses all go in for: some funny-shaped vases, some silverware, some cloth with native designs woven or stamped into it, some trick silvery gadgets I couldn't figure the use of. Those last things had a card alongside them, reading, "Just arrived from Ganymede City, a new shipment of warpers." That interested me. I don't have any need for a warper, whatever that is, but I opened the door and went in.

It was a brand-new store, I knew at once, from the smell of the fresh paint and the bright new floor waxing. It was a fairly big store as these places usually go, even had a little balcony. There was a lot of free floor space and only a few low glass display cases scattered around casual-

like, and shelf-racks along the wall. Everything had neat little cards saying what the objects were and the price, if they happened to think of it. All these Houses are laid out like little museums. That's what I like about them.

A clerk came up to me. He seemed a very pleasant sort of chap, very ruddy in complexion, with a nice smile. Before he can ask me if he can help me, I said, "Just lookin'," like I always did, and he nodded understandingly.

"We've just opened for business today. If you see anything that interests you, please ask me," he said, and added, "I don't suppose you are too familiar with Ganymede crafts . . ."

I nodded again, looking down at a case full of the usual stuff. It was jewelry, pins and metal clasps for women, looking something like the stuff you see in Greenwich Village. Odd designs. I said to the clerk, to be polite, "Ganymede wouldn't be near Finland, would it?"

"Well," he hesitated and said, "you could say that it was as close to Finland as it is to America."

I was looking at some trays and didn't answer him. After all, geography isn't my strong point, New York being the whole world to me. The tray I was looking at was rather interesting. It was one of a series of such wooden trays,

all of which had designs or pictures painted on them. Maybe not painted, they looked almost like photographs sort of worked right into the wood. I examined this tray real close.

The design on it was real spectacular. Showed a guy in funny armor mounted on some sort of winged dragon, chasing some screwy-looking creatures all full of knobs and legs. The clerk looked over my shoulder and said, "That's a rather good reproduction of Droomil's rout of the goombals. A very good buy."

It was good, too. A little too fairy-tale sort-of for my own house, but I thought I'd keep it in mind. "What's the price?" I asked, to be polite.

"It's only thirty-seven dollars," the clerk said, which I thought was more than I could afford to pay for a wooden tray, even if it did have a picture on it that you could look at for hours and see more and more details. I nodded and walked away slowly, looking at other things.

My time was running short, when I saw a rack with some table stuff on it. Maybe I could get some little thing as a sort of souvenir, I thought. So I looked at some spoons and some cups and saucers, and finally I found a little salt shaker that I thought the wife would like. My wife has a lot of salt and pepper shakers.

She kinda collects them. She's got a pair like a frog and mushroom, and one like a rooster and hen, and so on. So this little salt cellar I thought she'd like.

The clerk picked it up and looked at the price. "It's a dollar and ninety-eight cents," he said, "but it's really worth the money."

That's kind of high for a thing like that, but I really liked the gadget, so I dug out two dollars. "Wouldn't there be a sales tax?" I asked.

The clerk frowned. "We've just opened today and we haven't got our license to collect the sales tax yet. So I suppose you are the gainer. We won't charge you the tax."

Well, it's good to feel you're getting away with something. I gave him the two bucks. He dug into a drawer and got out two cents. For a minute he looked at the coins in a puzzled way. "Now, why would they want to make it such an odd price?" he mumbled to himself. He shrugged his shoulders, gave me the pennies, wrapped up the little salt shaker in brown paper, and thanked me.

I left the place and went about my business.

Well, to tell you the truth, I'm sorry I didn't make a note of the

address. I can't seem to find the street that Ganymede House is on, though I think I've been on it several times since. I keep telling myself that I'll look it up in the phone book, but you know when you get to the office you have other things on your mind and never get around to thinking about something like that until it's too late.

It's a pity, too, because I want to buy a dozen more of those salt cellars to give my friends for Christmas. They're really cute. Take this one, which my wife and I use every day. It's like a little, round, coppery barrel, and it's so convenient. It always hangs in the middle of the table just about two inches above the table cloth. And when you want it you only have to start to reach for it. It just moves right over to your plate, tips itself over neatly in mid-air, spills just the right amount of salt, and floats back over the cloth to the middle of the table. And when you take the table cloth off, the thing floats up to the ceiling and stays there next to the light fixture until the table is set again.

If I can find Ganymede House again, I know my friends will really appreciate salt cellars like that. • • •



A Science Fiction Novelette

THE HEART OF THE GAME

ON VOLMORA, a whisper ran across the yellow living fluid under the vast and ancient trees. Each living cell caught the whisper, pondered it. Vacuoles opened in each cell to add each tiny strength to the sending of the message.

They were but tiny cells in the great leaves of the immortal trees, yet each with its own work and life and interest; each with its own knowing and feeling and doing. The whisper grew, and became a great wind of meaning rushing across the yellow fluids of the ocean. On the farther shores the great trees lifted their leaves and heard. "It comes! The laughter of the babe from nowhere will be among us once again!"

by Richard English

Down toward the sea of life rushed the metallic shell of "the man-babe", splashing a geyser of foaming spray as it sledged over the mild, silent surface. The great mouths beneath the surface smiled with grim amusement, and forbore to gulp down the innocent ignorant from the barrens of beyond.

Within the space-craft, one Richard Horton gazed with awed eyes at the brooding, vasty scape of sea and trees and strange, slow-moving monstrosities not to be described by any earthly tongue. In his mind he heard again the voice of Dr. Fort-Masson, saying:

"We are so used to life's fixed patterns on this world that we cannot easily understand the differences of which the life force is capable. In our minds life means dogs, cats, cows, men and insects and trees, all the familiar creatures of earth. But life can be anything, is modified by the infinitely varied conditions of its being on the innumerable worlds of the universe . . . into *anything!*"

Horton remembered stopping the old man with a raised hand, saying: "I can accept all that, Doctor. I can imagine that life as we know it is but a faint echo of what it can be under better and varied conditions. But it is hard for me to picture this par-

ticular violent mass of growth of which you are speaking! Volmora! The place has drawn me, fired my imagination since first I read your reports on it. But why is the thing so important? No other explorer even mentions the world."

He remembered now especially the old explorer's smile, as he murmured: "No other human ever returned from Volmora, Horton! But if any had, they would have brought back far more than from any number of other voyages to the so-called cultured peoples of far planets. Within just one small area of a thousand acres or so, there exists, on Volmora, a most titanic struggle between advanced life forms. It has been going on for untold centuries. Its equivalent on Earth is not to be imagined. Just suppose the nations of Earth had been locked upon one small battlefield for a thousand years! And even that—."

Horton had not been able to visualize the picture, the old man saw by his puzzled expression. He went on, trying to depict the undepictable. "There, the greatest enemy of their life is the same vitality and tenacity bequeathed all the upspringing ignorant new life—in other words, *life* itself! Yet it is that virtue of strength-in-life that is their power, and it is hardest of all to comprehend

that the gift of vast and powerful life-force within the individuals brings with it its own set of terrific problems."

Horton had stood up then, impatiently, eager to get on with his plans. "I'm going there, Doctor. You have said the greatest treasure in all space would be to learn what those ancients of Volmora have learned in their endless struggles with the obstacles life itself creates. I mean to get some of that treasure!"

The old man nodded, sighed. "I advise you try elsewhere. But if it must be Volmora, remember you cannot return to brag about your visit, as I did. Our Government has forbidden visits to Volmora, because no one returns. Yet . . . with my talisman in your hand, and the right attitude of simple desire for learning . . . you might live. Yet . . . I don't know if I am being wise . . ."

Tearing his mind from introspection, putting all thought of Earth away from him, Horton bent all his attention upon listening, as the old man had taught him. And like a strange wind across the fields of thought that were within his mind, he heard!

"The game begins! The game begins!"

There was gargantuan laughter, a vast and many-voiced amusement, an anticipation that

was embarrassing in its implication of clownish behavior on his own part. Horton could not recall having been laughed at very often . . . and that thought seemed to bring on a convulsion in his unseen audience. Angrily Horton heard himself exclaiming aloud: "So it's particularly excruciating that no one in my own world found me comical, is it?"

The reply rushed through and around him . . . "Excruciating!"

For Horton, there was little sign of struggle at first. He learned rapidly, he thought. He heard the howl of amusement as his idea of "learning rapidly" with an embarrassment to which he was becoming accustomed, if not immune.

He learned that all Volmora was knit about with telepathic sensing; that every living creature evaded the telepathic hunting of the predators by the creation of false thought patterns in their minds. Just as on Earth a butterfly seems to be a leaf, or a chameleon takes on the color of a stone, or a mantis pretends to be a twig. That immense hunger, hunting for what would fill it, was sensed mentally by the lesser creatures and evaded instantly by mental posturing, rapid flight, or instant attack—or a combination of all three.

It was this instantaneous perception of peril and the instan-

taneous reaction to it that made life possible for the native life-forms. It was the lack of this faculty that made life on Volmora so precarious to an Earthman. For he could not sense any single mentality among the many that he heard constantly, nor could he react to peril with the speed and quickness of thought. If he did hear or see something he thought was dangerous, it was always a mistake. It was this bungling progress through the jungle that made him so funny to the Volmorans. He would shy from a harmless edible mushroom because he thought it was the back of a monstrous turtle, or turn his explosive pellet gun upon a liana possessed of movement as it tried to move from under his feet. For the Volmorans he was pure slapstick, broad and convulsing and eternally wrong in every one of his perceptions and reactions.

After some hours of this, one of the ancients conceived a new angle to the comedy, and consulted with the other aged mentalities about him. And presently from a great bulbous monstrosity of growth exuded a flow of red and viscous sap, which presently became surrounded by a film of whitish substance. The globule hung in the brilliant sun-glow, and within it went on swift change. The strength of many minds were at work directing the

life in the globule, working with it as a man's hands would work with clay, manipulating the tiny spore seeded in the red gum-like fluid. Swiftly within the strange womb grew a life.

II

Not many hours later, Horton had begun his stumbling exploration of the second great valley of mossy growth that lay between the three arms of rocky outcrops stretching down to the beach where his craft lay on the sands. For a time, it seemed this valley was to be as unrewarding as the first. Then he stepped through a screen of vines and leaves into a glade in the everlasting forest.

It was a spot of exquisite beauty. Wood-flowers nodded tremendous but delicate cups, tiny scampering forms disappeared beneath the riotous fern leaves, and Horton stood for minutes drinking in the delicious scene and wondering how anything could be so lovely and yet contain deadly threat, impossible peril . . .

A low voice came to him from deeper in the glade. For an instant as he turned he glimpsed what seemed a human face half hidden by the screening greenery. That voice had seemed to say: "That is the one? Oh, ha ha!" He put this thought down to his overworked nerves, and did not

leap off in pursuit of the impossible face. His second thought, that the face had possessed qualities entirely feminine and utterly fascinating, decided him. He had had enough, he was seeing things. He made his way back to the ship and tried to compose himself to sleep.

But in his bunk he lay frozen in a daze of ecstatic anticipation. He was afraid to move for fear he would destroy the dream of that face that was so much more than any face he had ever been attracted to before.

Next dawning, after a night of impatient tossing on his pneumatic mattress, he made his way with precipitate and utterly reckless haste back to the spot. Above him through the leaves whispered the everlasting murmur of half-understood meaning, and he was sure he could discern the growing strength of that murmur as it swept on and on through a myriad listening minds. Moreover, it seemed the meaning was a vast glow of pride in their handiwork, an anticipation of delightful foolery to come . . . The words, if he could have put those half-heard, strange concepts into words, would have been: "He is attracted to the She we have made for him! Now we shall see ridiculous fun, as our creature traps him in coil upon coil of . . ." He could find no word for THAT.

Perhaps they meant *preposterous romanticism*, and even as he almost accepted the whispering, he rejected it all as his own fevered imagination.

Cautiously he crept forward now, determined to surprise the owner of that face if she existed. He peered through the screen of leaves where the face had appeared, and into the bower beyond, refusing the evidence of his eyes. His heart sang strangely as his mind at last accepted the truth of her existence. Here was the nest where she had slept, perhaps dreaming of himself as he had dreamed of her. But she was gone.

Into the bower he crept, silently, carefully, not to disturb the numerous articles betraying HER occupancy. Chains of flowers strung upon the stems of grasses hung along the wall of vines. Little shells had been put together in child-like patterns of play upon the carpet of soft greenery underfoot. There were dozens of great hard-shelled fruits piled in a nook beneath the root of a tree, and a little knife of hardwood was still moist where she had been prying out the pulp of the purple fruit.

Horton sat down upon HER couch of piled mosses, and waited. Presently she would think him gone and steal back, and he would perhaps get a

chance to make friends. But the sleepless night now took its payment. The finding of the reality of the glimpsed face had caused a release of tension that resulted in an overwhelming sleepiness. His head nodded, he was weary. Perhaps Volmora was not the terrible land of peril old Fort-Masson had tried to picture to him. If this child of the wilderness was able to grow to adulthood alone in this forest, with no protection but her sharp ears and swift feet, so could he survive with his powerful weapons and experience . . . So thinking, with his eyes heavy, he sank gradually into a reclining position, and within fifteen minutes of his vigil's beginning, he was snoring lustily.

It was Horton's first sleep upon Volmora. He went almost at once into a dream state.

It seemed that he became with complete naturalness a part of a mighty game. He could see the players above him in a misty far-off dimness, gigantic forms that were not rigid or solid, but motile and changing. Yet, in all their slow changing from bulging beast-shape to waving tree-shape to slender, endlessly reaching snakiness, they retained an unmistakable character. Each of them was himself, a self having nothing to do with shape.

The game was just beginning again. He had been given a part . . . a startlingly important part. The focus of play was all about him, he was the new center. His mind fumbled with the game until he saw the analogy. It was like chess, and he was the new king! A king was a piece unable to attack or defend except feebly, yet whose freedom and inviolability was the point, the heart of the game. Quite abruptly he understood why the Volmorans had welcomed him. He was the perfect kingpiece, and it enlivened the game to have the king utterly comic.

He looked about him, and was aware of the Queen, beside him, charming in appearance, but frightening in her utter self-sufficiency and strangely savage mental outlook. She seemed to find him a delectable prospect, a unique and priceless specimen . . . and he was newly embarrassed. Her thought was: "a specimen of un-manhood".

She was human in appearance. How then could she have mental powers and physical armament so superior to his own? Without conscious thought, instinct told him that the powers of the varied pieces were bequeathed and determined by the whim of the players. And that "whim" was yet ancient and unbreakable law, just as in chess.

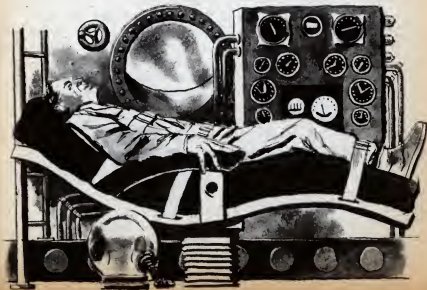
In his dream he examined the other pieces, the beasts of the vast yellow ocean on the enemy side, and the beasts of the endless towering forests and swamps and plains. All, all were pieces in the game being played over and over again by the mighty, distant players.

There were two groups of players who used this certain area of the planet for their board. The distant group, the rulers of the sea, were far more strange in their unending change. His mind could not grasp any stable thing about them for comparison in his own experience of Earth life. Their characters, wise, subtly sinister, knowing and patient in their vast plans for the game to come, were ruthless in their slow visible evaluation of the various group-

ings and possibilities of the circular area that included many miles of sea and forest and plain.

Behind him he was conscious of his own side, the Lords of the Forest, breathing vast windy breaths like great trees in a storm, or like mountains swept by winds, or again, like subterranean vaults, brooding, empty, yet full of living thought. His sleeping mind faltered, trying to grasp the unknowable quality of the subterranean Lords. And he found their thought in himself, delicately conjuring understanding in him, telling him who were his friends and who his enemies in the game now to begin.

Quite suddenly he was not asleep, and knew he was not alone. Cautiously he peered



through his lashes out of slitted eyes, trying to see, without betraying that he was awake, what had approached him in his sleep. SHE was there, in her place in her bower, watching him, waiting for the King to awaken.

On her soft lips there was a smile, unknowable in its mysterious depth of meaning, so that he saw through the slight motion of delicious lips a distant reflection of thought not her own, but the conveyed thought of the players seeing through the Queen's eyes. His mind closed now forcibly, he was not to know when they moved him or why.

He opened his eyes, then, and smiled at the woman's instant reaction to his waking.

She sprang back from him, for she had been seated, bending over him and peering intently at his sleeping face. She had been fascinated, but she herself did not know why.

In one explosive motion she sprang back, reaching up, and in her hands appeared a weapon, a long stick with thorns he knew instinctively were poisoned.

"Be careful, Beautiful," Horton heard himself saying in a low, soothing voice. "Those poison thorns are far greater peril than myself."

She shook her head, and he knew the words were not mean-

ingless to her, but unnecessary. She understood quite well what he meant. For answer she lay the thorn branch carefully away overhead, in a place from which she had just seized it. Then she relaxed and came toward him, squatting on the soft mosses before him, peering and bending to look into his eyes. She did not need words for speech. She was asking: "Why are you here in my home?"

He found himself speaking words unnecessarily, for she had divined his meaning before he himself had found the words to fit. "I was waiting for you. I saw your face and could not rest until I saw all of you."

"And now that you see all of me—" came into his mind from hers, and he watched her lips parting in anticipation of the thought she peered at behind his eyes, and he could hear the echo of his own thought in her mind as she listened, "—you find me beyond compare. You wish to embrace, to love me, you want my lips . . ."

Her eyes dropped, and she struggled to withhold her own thoughts from his eyes. Horton, watching, sensed a wrongness, an unearthly slant to her meanings. She was thinking:—"How could I want to give my lips to an outland beast, of no knowledge and little intelligence? How can you

speak of love, who does not have in his heart even the seed of true love?"

Somehow, listening, Horton heard the pronouns all wrong. He was an "it", and she was an "art". They were two very different things, in her mind, and not man and woman at all. His puzzling about this was comical to the unseen players. Yet the fact was that the game was of deadly seriousness, not only to him but to the unseen powers behind, above . . . he did not know where! He sensed that was part of the game, never to know. It was not a game for sport only! It was a game between two vastly divergent ideals, two mighty long-term plans for two divergent futures that could never exist on the same world. It was a very old game. His coming, strangely, had caused a pause, a new alignment of forces, a fresh beginning.

Horton vaguely wondered if he would ever come to understand and appreciate the nuances, the full, complete, detailed picture of the conflicting futures projected by these two warring plans. The back of his mind abruptly ceased to consider anything but the here and the now of HER, this strange wild human.

Some flow of message meaning had told him she was the only other human on the planet . . .

"You can never understand,"

she was saying, watching him with a cat-to-mouse look, "having been born on a world where there are many, that I am the only one. The ones who made me are not like me! But those who made you are like you. That is why we are not both *it*. I am an *art*, and that is far more than something just accidentally born."

Horton tried to digest this, and failed utterly. She turned her face away, dismissing him as a thing of no possible consequence, having no mind. Embarrassment, humiliation, anger, pursued each other through Horton's mind. He burst out: "Women always put on superior airs for no reason. You are human enough in that."

She ignored his outburst, and after a time he swallowed his anger, asked humbly: "This game we play. If we win, what do we win? If we lose, what do we lose?"

She did not answer, and he leaned sidewise to see her expression, but there was an enigmatic mask over her features. He could neither hear her thought nor guess what it might be. She stood up suddenly in one of her explosive motions, this one eloquent of exasperation. "You do not know, or do you not want to know? It should already be knowledge within you. You are very stupid to ask."

Horton pondered over that. Somehow, inside, he knew the an-

swers, but could not assemble them properly in his consciousness. Finally he guessed: "If we win, we win a life of fulfillment of our natural wishes. If we lose, we will be transformed into something we will never find natural. We will find ourselves forced to conform to a pattern of living to which we can never truly adapt. Is that correct?"

She sat down, gently now, clasping her hands and knitting her brows in concentration. "Of course, you *do* know all the time! Why should you not believe what you know is true?"

Horton drifted into a lost contemplation of her beauty, did not even hear her speech. "I do not even know your name. Will you tell me?" he asked, his voice catching in his throat as if reluctant, so that he kept silent and let his mind do the talking.

"I know *your* name! Why don't you know mine?" She was indignant again, and Dick Horton sought again through his mind for this new *knowing* that he did not need to learn beforehand. "I feel your name is Rhea . . . Rhea what? But I do not know *how* I know."

She sniffed contemptuously. "On this world one does not have to learn any simple thing. Everything has already been learned, and is waiting to be known by you. It is only the *new* things, that did not exist before you, that must

be learned. When you learn them, *then they exist forever!* No one has to learn them again!"

Horton shook his head. It made no sense, yet he knew very well it made greater sense than he was used to having in his mind. So he tried this new-found *knowing* on it, and found he really knew all about it. One was in mental contact with a myriad of minds. No knowledge was lost. *They retained it all* in their billion-trillion memories, and when one reached for it, there it was, ready to *know!*

III

"It is time for a move. The focus of power approaches," Rhea whispered, her face flushed with sudden elation, an anticipation of glorious action to come. Horton flinched from the terrific picture he caught of vast powers moving across the face of this world, intangible, terrible as a tornado, irresistible and ancient beings bent upon incomprehensible goals . . . and himself the focus-to-be of their warring! His knees shook, his hands began to quiver, he found himself unable to rise, until the quaking passed as quickly as it had come. For he "knew" that the game was also a way of bringing about new knowledge, and that they must shift about a new center to bring about new conditions; new forces must be brought into play. These were

friendly powers he could hear approaching. As the strength of them became a thunder in his mind, he fell into a trance of unhearing waiting.

In his trance he followed Rhea, who went gliding into the deeper shadows of the forest, pausing only to snatch a bunch of fruit like grapes from a vine. He picked a bunch, too. They were not grapes, but tasted like nuts without shells.

They were the first food he had eaten on Volmora except his own tinned rations. He had feared to eat anything, not knowing its effect. But now he would always "know" what was good and what was not good, so long as the game went on. The pleasure of eating the fruit was intense, and he "knew" that this pleasure was compounded of the reaction of many minds to the thought of eating, their memories adding strength to his own pleasure in eating.

As his trance state diminished into consciousness again, he found himself wondering: "In chess, the players alone do not die. The pieces are all killed, the King as well as the Queen . . . but no! The King is never killed, only imprisoned, deprived of movement!"

Pondering further, he heard himself questioning the surrounding aura of listening minds,

"Must the whole planet be devastated, everything else killed, just to checkmate me? And does that checkmate mean death?"

His knowing told him *Yes* to both questions. Rhea turned and smiled, then broke into a laugh. "You are wrong again! There is no real death on Volmora! Bodies sometimes perish, but yourself goes on! I have lived long, over a century of your time since I became a being in the thought of the many. But only when you came did I acquire a body!"

And then there was no time for questioning or wonder. The air about them was suddenly full of flying forms, which opened fish-like mouths as they flew toward the human pair, and as they struck their teeth ripped and tore. Rhea screamed. Horton threw himself flat, pulling Rhea with him to the ground. Something abruptly diverted the stream of flying things, before Horton had fully understood that they were being attacked by flying fish, here in the depths of a forest. The stream of flying forms passed, a solid phalanx of soaring death, piranha mouths champing under fixed fierce stares, long, vivid wings glittering prismatically, long, steel-strong, slender bodies quivering . . . and was abruptly gone.

Rhea threw her arms about Horton then, there on the soft

moss of the forest carpet, and he found himself kissing the dozens of bleeding gashes on her bare arms and shoulders as he murmured, "There, there, they have gone, and you will soon heal. Let me use my first aid kit."

At his words she released herself and drew back, her eyes horrified and her hands pushing him away. "You *know* that the proper remedy for such bites is the sap of the boondar tree, yet you want to get your mercurial poisons! Why can't you learn to know correctly?"

She hadn't said a word, but he had heard her horrified thought and, seeking desperately in his mind for the new knowledge, he understood that mercury to her body chemistry would have a virulence unimaginable to an Earthman. He read, too, a dozen simple remedies for such superficial wounds, all better than anything in his kit. He bowed his head in a fearful realization that his suggestion of using Earth's poisonous antiseptics had not been at all comical to the powerful minds who had created this Rhea . . . and this time his belief went along with the concept of creation. For such beings apparently had the power to clothe a thought with flesh if there was a need for it.

Into him came a new and powerful thought: "We remem-

ber the ignorant medical methods brought to us by the others from your world. You must not again think of using any of that inadequate toxicology based upon an inorganic medicinal pharmacopoeia often more detrimental to the one treated than the injury itself. Seek first our own healing methods, always waiting in the myriad ancient memories about you. And if you see the Sea Queen's flying brutes again, remember to think of yourself as a great beast fond of eating fish, and hold your body quite still. They hunt you by your thought, and it is a most delectable, helpless tidbit you reflect from the listening about you to their hunting scent."

So the two, Horton the King and Rhea the Queen, went silently and humbly through the thinking, friendly forest toward the nearby boondar tree that waited consciously for their coming. They spread the already exuded sap with their fingers everywhere the fishes' teeth had scored their flesh. Within short minutes the pain went out of the wounds and they knew they would heal now without soreness.

Then Rhea went through a little ritual of blessing the ground beneath the tree, a kind of prayer of communion with the tree, and they lay down and slept under it. When they awoke they collected

several armloads of dried animal dung from the game paths, spreading them beneath the tree for payment, for such was the law. A benediction followed them as they left, and a thrill of pleasure went through them, for they had obeyed the law.

A thought came to Horton from his own maladjusted self, then, and a shudder went through all the gentle forest . . . or was it gentle only in the seeming it wore like a veil of mist? His thought, that "perhaps he had fallen into a basic error, and should in truth be upon the side of the Sea? For how could the life of the forest ever conquer the boundless ocean?"

"It is the game, and it goes on! Our life is a part of land life, how then could we be part of the sea?"

Horton looked at Rhea, wondering if it was really she speaking, and was confused at knowing he could never be quite sure whether he was talking to her or to one of a million other minds which all managed to be present in his "knowing".

Rhea looked at him coldly, her lips sliding back from her perfect teeth to reveal a savage sort of snarl that was certainly never meant to be a smile. "So you already wonder if you have made a mistake and chosen the losing side? And for this we make you our King? Perhaps you are right,

and we should throw you to the sea and dismiss you from our plans?"

Unhappy idea, unhappy thinking. He withdrew from his thoughts, and moved softly along beside Rhea, his feet noiseless beside hers on the moss. He let his mind relax into the knowing presence of the many about him, felt their welcome. Living became again a great adventure, the flowers seemed to open afresh, the leaves drooped to caress him, and the thorns lifted themselves from before his path. He felt now an upwelling of contentment, a something vastly more than any homecoming could ever be.

Suddenly he was aware of the distant great beating of *the heart of life*, somewhere in the dim greenness of an inviolate and secret forest glade. He heard *the heart* saying: "This is your natural home, the forest and the glens and the streams that go splashing and rippling down to the quiet rivers."

- And that distant heart was his own heart, too, as truly himself as *the heart-thought* of all that multitudinous life that made up Volmora's citizens.

Now the light came stronger from above, and Horton wished he could see the sky. Instantaneously he could see, with some distant thinker's eyes, two suns drifting overhead, one high and

one just risen. Though the sky was entirely hidden, he yet "saw" it clearly, deep vivid blue-green, a peacock color striped with lazy white streamers of cloudland, colored bizarrely by the rising second sun into warm rose and flaming scarlet and soft pink and hazy gold. Far off he sensed the yellow sea lying sullenly waiting; he feared it, for it was the enemy watching for the time to hurl its myriad warriors against his own. He feared for his friends of the forest, knowing their bodies must perish in the battles to come until it was decided once and for all who ruled Volmora and what it was to become.

The game had become very real to him now. He saw his own part more clearly, the long chain of events stretching out from himself to Rhea to the misty future that would eventually mold that future to the all-hearts' desire. He heard the all-hearts' heart of hearts beat in reply, distant and dark and profound, and love for this life beyond his own was strong and knowing in him. His arm went about Rhea's waist. She leaned against him, knowing their new affection was everyone's natural affection. Together they joined in the thinking of the many minds, feeling the life-principle itself coinciding all its lines of force with all their own, like a general marshaling his

armies. Together they rediscovered TO BE, a purpose which was the center of all purpose and their own central will. Dick Horton had never understood that all his thinking was always the life principle of all time's flows; allied and mutually dependent life-forms reaching through his mind toward better life. He knew then, with Rhea's soft, pliant waist within his arm, that never before had he understood what thinking and life-effort were really about. Now he did know, and would always work with all other lives to make the life-field more hospitable for each of them.

"There are two enemies in life, and only two," he heard his own voice murmuring. "One is mutually supporting life, the symbiotes. The other is mutually destructive life, the parasites and the omnivores who have developed an errant line of effort from the central principle."

"On your world," murmured Rhea, "the errants long ago conquered and destroyed the natural life-pattern, to substitute a degenerative pattern of their own."

"As bad as that?" asked Horton, not caring if he was conversing with Rhea or the all-mind about him. For now he knew it was all the same thing.

"As bad as that, dear student. Of course, it can always be changed, come to understand its

own errant nature and begin to remedy its faults. But it can never become what it would have been had the symbiotes won the first great battle."

"Armageddon," thought Horton, and about him murmured the myriad thinking selves:

"Armageddon, an age ago, and the symbiotes died. Then Earth inherited death and age and warfare forever. Sorrow came to live forever with each one, and all minds separated into single warring entities. Forever they try to destroy each the other, never seeing the other *as themselves* . . . though their true interests are identical, and never opposed. The trees became victims, the forests passed away. The streams dried up, the air became sterile and empty of the trees' gift of living water. The sun became a deadly enemy, burning away the green base life into deserts. Catastrophe followed disaster, life nearly perished on Earth. Then came a slow resurgence of the symbiotes, left alone by the vanished destructives. And again the name of *man* became the synonym for death, for he multiplied and he destroyed. Again Earth became barren and blasted with war, and man almost vanished. Think you our forest of life wants MAN?"

Horton withdrew his arm from about Rhea, and her eyes blazed sudden anger at him. "Fool, you

cannot comprehend. *They mean man without contact and love!* Here, man could be many and strong, and still not lose symbiotic contact. It is not the shape or color of a life that makes it one or the other. It is its point of intent, the deep inner impulse of its energy, the direction of its will.

"To lose the direction, that is the sin that changes any life-form from a healthy part of all-life to an enemy of all life!" This came from some deep subterranean mind, and Horton accepted it as one with the voice of Rhea.

"I see." Horton lifted his head, recovered from his shock of learning what he himself was to this people so various yet one. His arm moved about Rhea's waist again, but she threw it aside, her eyes fierce as a mother leopard shielding her cub. "When you truly understand and are truly adjusted and a part of us, I will know! Until then, do not even think of love for me. It will be only pain to you! On Volmora there will be no robot race of erring ant-like-men, tearing the world of life into fragments beneath the tread of their insane armies!"

Horton bent his head, and walked beside her, silently cursing Earth's history. For within him was welling up a fountain of understanding, and in the light of that new thought he saw him-

self for a mutilated fragment of horror from an ancient world of pain.

"There are no ant armies upon Volmora," Rhea murmured, her voice softened now to a calm acceptance of him and his unpleasant heritage of horror. "But within the yellow sea many errant forms are developing, and the Sea Queen uses them in the game."

"Is all the yellow sea slipping into the anti-symbiote patterns?" asked Horton, reaching out now for what was concealed, the underthinking of the far-off destructive leaders, the terrible cancer that had destroyed his own world and was now seen to be at work here . . . perhaps grown beyond surgery.

"*That is the game!*" came Rhea's voice, but not her own sending. It was instead a terrific source of thought energy that brought her body up taut and vibrant against his own, not in love but in a terrific promise of something vastly more than any mere earthly love of male for female. And as swiftly the promise was withdrawn, became conditional upon his own development. Horton's self became then a reaching, an enfolding, a branching-out of many mental seeking fingers, and he heard his inner self swear an oath to make a mighty effort toward metamor-

phosis into . . . what? There was no earthly thought which could hold that concept, the thing he wanted to become.

"A sad Earth," he heard the myriad sighs of sympathy. "Sad, sad, not to know the word for *self*."

Horton knew that till this instant he had never had a *self*, but only a miasma of error, of inner delusion, an ego that twisted forever in tortuous fumbling from error to mistake to dunghheap of ignorance.

Abruptly Rhea laughed, throwing off the whole too-serious discussion with a toss of her dark mane of glossy tresses. She stepped close, holding him for a long second and staring into his eyes. Then she pulled his head down to her soft breast, close and sweet and melting, and a self that was really her own came out and peered from within her into his own inner eyes.

"Happiness," said Rhea, her voice a soft murmur of real words above his head. "Win or lose we have ahead many days and nights of love. Forget now, and become again your own poor starved Earth-self, and let me help you grow into our reality."

A kiss, was his thought. His act was swift to follow. Their kiss was an oath of dark bliss, a waiting they must enforce while they snatched from the stark game of

death to come what moments of peace might be theirs.

Then she was gone, and he was alone in the too-bright noon, the forest silent and waiting about him.

"The Queen has gone upon war's errand, the King is fixed upon his square," was Horton's last conscious thought as he sank upon the grass and slept.

IV

In his sleep Dick Horton felt the sullen yellow flood reach for him, lift him, chortle as it bore him away. When he won his struggle to open his eyes, there was a rushing all about him, and a face beside him that was *not* Rhea's face!

The face was familiar, like the face of some half-remembered portrait seen in an ancient mansion. Or a picture held up by an auctioneer, somewhere, that you knew you should know the person, but can't quite remember. His guessing about the nature of the owner of the face was half scornful, half impressed by the aura of lineage, of pride in power. A lean face, lovely in a bizarre angularity and strength, yet frightening with the suggestion of ruthlessness and self-will . . . Her thought reaching into his mind was mocking: "The King of the Forest does not resist? Where now is the promise of the Heart

of the Forest? Where the power of the hosts of forest beasts? What use the wisdom of the ancient dwellers of the undersoil?"

"Does this capture end the game?" asked Horton, half certain he was dreaming still, and about to awake safe in his forest glade.

The creature laughed, and he knew that was real laughter, a sound of mockery and bold, rebellious courage in his ears, and no dream. "End the game?" Her voice was sound, too, and he wondered why she should speak thus, like an air breather of his own world, and in his own tongue, until he realized it was the perfection of her mental contact that gave the complete illusion of speech; a trick, perhaps, to impress him. "Hardly, little man. You are not that important. I have captured the new King, yes. To you it is important, and to me. But they can create a newer King, or go on without one. To them, I wonder if you *are* important."

"Why to you?" asked Horton, his eyes and his new knowing faculty searching inwards toward her secret thoughts, while his conscious mind was employed taking stock of her soft sleek shoulders, the piercing grey eyes, the smooth, pointed chin under the mocking red lips.

"The Sea Queen has always a use for one who can give her

what you can give." Her eyes were suddenly keen with something too deep for Horton's faculties to search out. He found in his mind only a blankness and a strange mental scent like the hide of a seal under his nose—a scent that told him there was about him no thought-field natural to his mind, but only the grey reaching of many strange deep sea-things, searching for food, for life, for something else even more important yet unguessable to him.

"I am under the sea?" he asked, trying to pierce the almost-dark around him, and then the motion ceased and she released him. He stood alone as she moved away in the darkness. Fear of the weird, merciless thoughts about him rose up and overwhelmed him. This was not his place; this nest of terrible, alien thinking was too far removed from any possible path of human experience!

The light came slowly. He saw the wall of dark wetness holding back the inconceivable pressure of the terrible depths, and the Queen striding toward him across the floor of softly glowing glass. Some wild thing in him rose up, then, in answer to her bold beauty, the lithe grace and strength of her, the long clean legs with their swimmer's webs only adding an exotic touch of fantasy. She laughed at the flush

that rose in his cheeks, and touched his naked arm with her fingertips. He saw that her hand was but slender, too-long bones ending in sharp claws, with the webs between glittering wetly. Yet her touch was not a horror to him, but a strange wonder! His flush deepened, and between them pulsed a recognition of the wild courage and reckless will-to-pleasure in the other, a thing between them strong and new, that would never brook any obstacle barring them from their desires.

She was woman, well enough, in spite of her mer-woman look. Her breasts were two white poems of alabaster, her waist was a slender pillar of exotic rhythm swaying above her hips, as his eyes approved and would not leave off approving. His heart rose to a thunder in his breast in weird acknowledgment of her beauty's power over him.

"What could I have that you would find of value?" asked Horton, his eyes seeking her own while his mind strove against her lure, suspecting some subtle trickery at work, some reason for this capture of his susceptibility that evaded him. His mind strove against the meshes of her trap, but he knew only that he was powerless against her. His mind met in its searching only a mocking myriad of minds each assur-

ing him that he was now of the sea and would so remain.

"We of the sea want knowledge of your world, for many things have happened there in ages past of which we must know more. We have been cut off by the forest powers from learning of other worlds of life. There is one question we must answer. We think the answer is in you, unknown to you. Too, there is another reason I want you for myself. Need I say *what* that reason?"

Her eyes told him; and his mind knew it was true. His heart thundered that it had no will to escape. He tried to think of Rhea and of *the great promise*, but the knowing thought about him pressed the memory out of him and gave him a mocking emptiness, as swiftly replaced by a false memory of unpleasant forest aisles where only death awaited.

Willy-nilly, he was grateful to the Queen of the Sea for rescuing him from the death of the forest. His lips opened as he began to tell her so. But there was no need, she knew it, he knew that she would always know his deepest, most secret thought. Some little warning rang futile alarm in his inner mind, and a door swung slowly closed in his heart. Again he tried to release himself from the spell of her

strange beauty upon him. But it was all useless, and he moved toward her hungry arms eagerly, thinking only that he had courage to match hers, that together they would snatch great joy and infinite love from the hungry abyss of peril surrounding them.

Rhea sought for her Earthman a long time, when she returned, but there was only the wet track of the water that had rushed across the forest floor. There was only the certainty given her by the knowing forest minds that *the sea* had snatched him away. She pondered on the new use of forces by the sea that made it able to send water out of the sea on an errand such as that, where no water had ever flowed before.

"The King is captured," said the greater of the many minds of the forest. "But he has not mated yet!"

"They have provided a mate?" asked Rhea, and sadly knew that they had created such a thing, if it had not already been created long ago . . . perhaps a whole race of creatures similar to men. How could she know?

They took long council, then, with Rhea listening but not fully understanding, learning only that the vast forces of the sea were drawing together in a deep close at hand. She learned that her own rulers had decided to make a

thing of life to send against this sea army, before it came out to destroy forever the greater minds of the forest.

Rhea came, after weary days of waiting, to the place near the shore where the new life-thing had been created. It was huge, it looked like a fish, but it was no fish. Terrible were its jaws, huge its head, powerful its driver fins as the sea itself. She stood beside it as a mouse beside a mountain. At last its side opened, and she went in to the place prepared for her there.

It moved as a turtle moves, down the steep slopes to the sea, with its great fins working so powerfully that the land was thrown up in hillocks beside it. The life-thing struck the water with a roar of waves, slid along the mud bottom into deeper water. It lay there for a time, new-thinking with its vast mind, thoughts deafening to little Rhea. She could hear nothing but its call to the people of the sea.

Presently the sea people swam toward this beast now entered into the sea, gathered about it, and Rhea knew their minds were captured and enslaved by the vast forces of its thought. Then it moved, swimming powerfully, and beside it gathered ever new myriads of fish forms from the gardens of the sea, waiting now to do their new master's bidding.

Rhea lay inside the thing like a tiny seed in the womb of a monstrous mother. Her thought was but a part of the war-thought sent out by the monster war-thing. Her own self slept and waited, watching the shock and chaos of the growing battle about the new beast as a tree might watch the struggling of warring men beneath its branches.

Her mind went ahead of the deep-diving monster and ahead of the swarms of enslaved sea-creatures, fighting now against the Sea Queen's gathering forces. Down and down into the deeps ahead she went, to find the bubble of force within which walked her man, and within which walked also the Sea Queen to whom they had given her man. Most of all she wanted to pit her strength against the strange strength of that Sea Queen, to learn why they had taken him, and what they meant to do with him. For if she guessed aright, they meant to father a race of monstrous man-like warriors, amphibians to swarm out over the forest and overwhelm it once and for all under the Earthman's horrid way of life.

And all that diving and battling of the beast that bore her was like a dream, through which she slept, her dreaming mind racing ahead of events to reach the heart of the future and there turn

aside disaster. In her dream she wept and writhed in pain as she saw the many minds of the sea forces drawing from the Earthman's mind the plans for Earth's tools of war, the great guns and bombs and gases and deadly viruses Earthmen had used to destroy each other and the other good life on their world. Worst of all was the way of Earth armies. She awoke in a sweat of anger as she learned that they meant truly to use him to father an army of sea-creature slaves. "Sea-ants, like men, but even worse in their predestined will to destruction!" She was crying it out as she woke, and became conscious of the struggle about her beast, the mighty fishes tearing each other to bloody fragments as they were moved by the controlling mind of her powerful war-beast to protect the sides that enclosed her.

"It is his knowledge of warfare they want," the Heart of Hearts told her, from its home far off in the forest. "It is his seed, the destructive inheritance from his race's centuries of terrible error. They want to loose a host of such destructives upon our forests!"

Rhea was ready, then, the anger in her a great leashed power, as the beast she rode smashed into the bubble of force and burst through. Its side opened, and she stepped out, to face the queenly beauty of the sea-thing they had

made to trap the Earthman to their will. From her eyes the *on-power* streamed, gifted her from the life-strength of the hosts of forest folk, the queen-power her makers had given her. For a long minute the taller, lithe beauty of the mer-creature stood against that eye-glance of lightning. Then she bowed her lovely head and sank slowly to her knees.

Behind her Rhea could see now the black bodies, the massed sea-beasts in their deepest nest, and she felt now the full force of their blind hate. She staggered in weakness, for that was a terrible force unleashed against her; she felt her mind burning and withering in her skull. Then a strong arm seized her about the waist, and faintly she heard the voice of her dear, foolish Earthman, crying: "My Rhea, you came, riding that black monster to meet death for me!"

He lifted her, moved toward the opening in the side of the monster where it lay on the sea floor. Steam came out of its nostrils, and from its great head shot out thought-powered bolts of deadly meaning. The sea rulers coiled and writhed in their black nest, and now collapsed the bubble of force that held back the water from the Sea Queen's trap, where they had meant to breed the new race of Earthmen-slaves.

As the terrible pressure crashed

down about Horton and his Queen, the sea-rulers will never ceased to project hatred against Rhea. She straightened in Horton's arms, her feet touched the glassy pave, thrust forward against the roaring crash of waters upon them.

The mer-woman, struck, too, by the sudden crash of waters, yet tried to hold her captive. Now she seized them both by the arms, her driver-fins lashing to drag them back from the haven of the opening in the side of the huge thing that had brought Rhea. Rhea twisted from her grasp, caught her by the throat, and as Horton collapsed in the black water, thrust them both through the opening ahead of her, leaping in as the flesh-opening closed like a great mouth gulping in food.

Still the beast lay there, sending out against the sea rulers great bolts of truth-meaning. They coiled and writhed and twisted their wills into dull knots of futile error to escape the paralyzing truth-power.

Then with a thrash of great driver-fins the monstrous turtle form twisted, smashed against the force wall of the dark nest that protected the sea rulers, drove its weight into and upon the soft writhing forms of them. And what it did to them as they cast coils of tentacles about it was

what all whales do to all squids, slash them into eatable pieces and gulp them in.

But down upon the forests' swimming beast came now the whole host of the sea powers, fishes in schools so thick there seemed no water between them, biting and tearing at the dark woody sides of the forest beast. Great tentacular arms multiplied about the beast's dark sides, holding against the driving power of his fins.

Every grimy part of the beast was gripped and held by some writhing cable of strength. Ink sacs emptied till all was black as the pit, but still the vast strength of the beast moved, slowly on and on, the center of a terrible moil of threshing destruction. Against the sides of it those three tiny lives who had found shelter there felt the shock and rip and clash of teeth tearing, great bodies thrashing wildly to stay forever its driving force, to drain forever the living power of it. Every inch of the beast felt the force of the tearing mouths of the sea host, striving to tear out its mighty strength by fragments.

Inside, the minds of the three were assaulted with terrible will-force from the all-mind of the multitudinous life of the sea, but through it all there was felt a cooling force of sustaining will, and some of that was *from the*

sea; and some from the forest far above.

"There are rebel rulers in the sea, who want no warring with the land, who disapprove of the game!" The thought was in Horton's mind. "They want us all to live amicably together. They side with the symbiotes of the forest. They say there is no need of the game of war between us!"

"They are right," Rhea's thought answered. "These rulers behind the sea-woman here are errants. They plan everlasting destruction to all life not like their own. And what they call *their own* are the worst mutants of the life process, the most degenerate of the wrong paths creation can take; they are sea-life in which the original life seed has become distorted into horror . . ."

"What will you do with this Sea Queen you have captured, my Rhea?" asked Horton, lifting his head from the weariness that had overcome him.

"I am taking her mind back to the Forest Hearts for them to see what those others put in the flesh they designed for you to mate. They will know then that the ancient laws were broken by this clique behind her. They will know the ancient game has become but horror trying to overwhelm the peaceful folk forever. The Hearts must know, and plan differently."

Horton did not wonder who spoke, himself or Rhea or the myriad multitudes of the friendly folk of Volmora's all-mind. For he knew now that it mattered not at all, for he had found their wills the same as his own in truth, indistinguishable. He had learned that *self* is an illusion, possible only to one who has had no mental contact with living minds.

V

Now, on Volmora, many lazy suns have circled overhead. The years are many and long since the First became mated to the Earthman. Their children are many. But on Volmora there are no cities and no highways. The machine is still almost unknown, and un-needed.

In the yellow sea, too, swim great numbers of mer-men and mer-women. All of them claim descent from the First Queen of the Sea. It seems she was created by the urge of the life-union of the sea to mate with a strange air-breather, without fins or gills, when the Sea-Heart saw it was necessary for new ways to come to Volmora.

Over all Volmora death is little known, for no worthy mind-being is ever forgotten. The all-mind makes a new body for every being whenever the old one wears out. But many live on in the all-mind, without seeing any need

for a body except during the time of the Feast of Mating, and during the great Fete of the Day of the Armistice.

There is still a great game the ancient rulers of Volmora play, but it is said they do not take it so seriously as in former times. For there are but few dissidents to the rule of the All-heart, and Love-of-Being keeps all of the Friends within the Covenant.

There are still the hunters and the hunted, but this is ruled strictly by the Covenant; and mind-beings do not take part in the hunts. Short is the life of him who breaks the Covenant! For the hunter must always destroy the destructive, and there are hardly enough who become errant offspring of the life-force to keep hunters keen on the trail.

But the skies are always watched for the errant beings who may come from the worlds where error has overcome the Way of Life. And many come, but few are chosen. And fewer yet are those who ever leave Volmora for lesser worlds.

As King Horton said to the First, only yester-double-day, "To return to Earth would be a mighty game! But would the prize be worth the *lost* time?"

And as the First replied: "From your memory of Earth, is not the Way of Life there too weak, and the error too deep-rooted? What plants and what creatures would be left when the game was finally won?"

Then there was brooding, and a faint voice of ancient weakness spoke through the First, or beyond her: "We are not ready for such an effort, anyway. To overcome a whole world, that a few good seed-lives might be saved from the destruction of the destructives? Is there good thinking in such a project?"

Horton saying: "You are right! If we two went, we would not have the Heart of Hearts with us, for there is none left alive on Earth from the first beginners, as there was here. We would find ourselves set upon by all men, by every fierce life-form . . ."

Horton answering the voice that had spoken through him: "We might win *man*! It would be a worth-while game, and a fine prize!"

Heart-of-Hearts whispers to them both: "When you are ready, you will be told! Grow strong, and one day soon, you may go and play that finest game *on Earth!*" . . .

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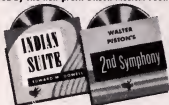
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